

**FROM COLONIAL SEGREGATION TO POSTCOLONIAL  
'INTEGRATION' – CONSTRUCTING ETHNIC DIFFERENCE  
THROUGH SINGAPORE'S LITTLE INDIA AND THE SINGAPORE  
'INDIAN'**

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## ABSTRACT

In Singapore the state defines the parameters of ‘ethnic’ identity on the basis of the ideology of multiracialism, in which any particular ‘ethnic’ identity is subsumed under national identity and permitted expression in cultural and economic, but not political, terms. Multiracialism’s appeal for the state as well as for its citizens lies in its objective: social cohesion between and equality for the four officially recognized ‘racial’ groups. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of the ‘Indian’ community, this thesis demonstrates how the multiple layers of meaning given to the doctrine and practice of multiracialism by various social actors and their interactions create tensions and contestations in reconciling ‘ethnic’ and national identity. Public expression of ‘ethnic’ politics is considered by the state as subversive towards the nation, although the state itself implements its ideology through a stringent regime of ‘racial’ management directed at every aspect of a Singaporean’s social, cultural, economic and political life.

The thesis addresses important issues involving ‘racial’ and ‘ethnic’ identity, modes of ‘ethnic’ interaction and nation building in the multiethnic and globalised context of Singapore in general and in ‘Little India’ in particular. This area, though theoretically democratic in nature, is embedded in state-civil society power relations, with the state setting the agenda for ‘ethnic’ maintenance and identity. My research interviews demonstrate the dominating and hegemonic power of the state, its paternalistic governance, and its wide network of social control mechanisms organizing ‘ethnicity’ in Singapore. The historical decision, made firstly by the British colonial administration and thereafter perpetuated by the nation state, to make ‘race’ the basis of all social classification has had far-reaching consequences. With the postcolonial state wishing to be the sole authority over ‘ethnic’ practices and discourse, Singaporeans’ lives have been heavily conditioned by its impact, which I argue resembles to some extent the ‘divide and rule’ policy of the colonial regime.

‘Race’ as the structuring principle and accepted reality of Singapore society since colonial days is so entrenched that it has been essentialised and institutionalised by the state as well as by the people in contemporary Singapore. The terms ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ are used interchangeably and synonymously in daily usage, though “race” is preferred by political leaders, academics and the population at large. I will argue that with ‘race’ as the reference point ethnic communities that migrated from China,

India and other places became socially, culturally and economically segregated and polarised from colonial days to such an extent that extensive stereotypes and prejudices have fed on their lives. Such perspectives have led to differing constructions of national identity discourses presented by the nation state based on its objectives of 'racial' integration, economic development and national identity. By way of interview and survey material I demonstrate that 'race', ethnicity and national identity as defined and managed by the state have not only been inextricably linked in the everyday lives of Singaporeans but more importantly they have resulted in a resurgence of ethnic consciousness in the last three decades or so, thereby undermining the state's attempts at national identity. My findings are based on responses by Singaporean Indians to various social engineering policies employed by the state as strategies for integrating the diverse ethnic groups and anchored on the ideologies of multiracialism, multiculturalism, multilingualism, multireligiosity and meritocracy. My respondents perceive that these policies are not proactive in fostering 'racial' integration because of growing social and economic inequalities brought about by the collision of ethnic and national identities with 'race'. They feel that the government has strayed from its declared goal of 'multiracialism', emphasized all along as critical to the strength, stability and growth of the nation. Such a situation, they argue, does not augur well for a common national identity that remains elusive in the eyes and minds of Singaporeans.



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**INTRODUCTION**

**Thesis Argument**

Singapore’s “Little India”, appears to take one back in history, to another time and, it would seem, another place. At first glance, “Little India” is everything its name suggests: a miniscule fragment of the vast Indian sub-continent in the globalised city-state of Singapore. The pattern of living here resembles that constructed in modern India. Yet ‘Little India’ today is significantly different from the squalid Indian ‘ethnic’ *kampung* (or village in Malay) of the colonial days because of the explosion of global forces and the evolution of the nation state which has ordered its historical and commercial transformation after independence in 1965, and particularly since the 1980s when it became designated as a heritage zone deserving conservation status and the popular name of ‘Little India’. A diminutive term designed both to preserve and contain its Indian ‘ethnic’ past, ‘Little India’ has been treated by the state as a public space catering to the gaze of tourists and Singaporeans alike in its management of ethnic consciousness juxtaposed with the creation of a common national identity through the ideology of multiculturalism. While this Indian ethnic environment has been fostered by the British in colonial terms, the Singapore nation state endeavours to supervise, and perhaps more importantly, to instill in its residents a sense of ‘multiracial’ and national identity, cultural values, the mutual help system, the protection of Indian sub-groups and the distinction of the whole Indian community from other ‘racial’ groups. However, what is not obvious is that Little India could, as my research shows, be considered a façade that masks the prevalence of ‘racial’ politics in Singapore as a whole.

This thesis interrogates the construction of ethnic difference in Singapore from the colonial era to the present, with special emphasis on the Singapore ‘Indian’ in the context of Little India. I will argue that the calling of the Indian area of Singapore ‘Little India’ in the postcolonial period is a mode of retelling the British colonial narrative. At the same time it articulates the ideological agenda of an independent nation state of Singapore. I will argue that the relationship between these two

narratives is marked by a continuum of 'racial' politics directed towards achieving hegemony, which has been the basic intent of both the colonial and postcolonial state. The 'racial' politics begun by the British in the colonial period has continued in the form of a dominant postcolonial discourse that attempts to reconcile the ideals of national integration and a state-controlled Singaporean identity via the construction, maintenance and celebration of ethnic difference. However the perceived domination of one racial group – the Chinese – creates among the remaining racial minorities a sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit knowledge (both intellectual and emotional) of the contradictions and discriminations attending multiracialism and its constant reiteration by the Singapore government. This knowledge will be explored with particular reference to Little India and the Singapore 'Indian'.

I assume in this study that there are multiple layers of meaning attaching to the social production and construction of space in the world of the Singapore 'Indian'. Different social actors like the state, Singaporeans, tourists, Indian migrants and other ethnic groups have combined to shape present-day 'Little India'. These actors have invested it with meanings, feelings and emotions interwoven with the passage of history associated with the place, its community and identity. The built environment of postcolonial 'Little India' has therefore become a terrain of contestation and negotiation between various groups that access or occupy it. Their different constructions give us a better understanding of how, in the words of Setha Low, "public space in urban society becomes semiotically encoded and interpreted reality".<sup>1</sup> They also demonstrate that linkages between place, history, community and identities have always been and continue to be ideologically charged in the spatial organization of the Singaporean city-state. Because spatial experiences differ according to one's perspective, this thesis also attempts to uncover the intricacies of these interactions by exploring the problematic and complicated nature of identities in the context of diaspora conflicts among Indians in the 'multiracial' and globalised nation state of Singapore.

In exploration of my arguments, I probe, by way of historical research, interviews and survey fieldwork, the way Singapore Indians relate to and articulate their sense of ethnic identity and belonging in relation to the process of national integration and national identity pursued in the various policy initiatives of the state,

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<sup>1</sup> Setha M Low, "Spatialising Culture: The Social Production and Social Construction of Public Space in Costa Rica," *American Ethnologist* 23, 4 (1996): 861-879.

bearing in mind the conflicts, contestations and tensions that confront Indians as they go about their daily co-existence with members of other ethnic groups in a multiracial, multicultural, multireligious and multilingual setting. In focusing on the sensitive theme of 'race' politics that began with the colonial administration and has been since perpetuated by the nation state, I aim to offer a perspective on Singapore's 'racial' politics from the point of view of the minority Indian community in Singapore.<sup>2</sup> Far from any desire to articulate a critique of the nation state's social engineering policies for the mere sake of doing so, my thesis grows out of the candid views of the Indians about these policies and highlights the continuing and ongoing discourse of 'race' and ethnicity that has pervaded the ideologies governing the various strategies and policy initiatives of the state as well as the everyday lives of the Indian community. Any criticism arising from the responses of interviewees is therefore offered in a constructive spirit and not meant to cast aspersions of any sort on the state, its agencies or any of the communities residing on the island, much less detract from the nation's phenomenal economic achievements.

In pursuing my research, I have been encouraged and indeed inspired by repeated calls from senior government leaders in the last fifteen years that the state welcomes greater public consultation, dialogue and openness. Acknowledging that it had "no monopoly of knowledge and ideas", and that there was a compelling necessity to heed people's emotions and sincere feedback on government policies, the state is beginning to reinvent itself by agreeing that society needs to open up further so as to ensure greater stability and economic dynamism in the years to come.<sup>3</sup> It is conceded by many in Singapore that the perceived 'fear factor' had hitherto prevented ordinary Singaporeans from expressing themselves freely in civic engagement. The state's paternalistic approach in fostering an effective and efficient management of society had resulted in apparent political apathy as Singaporeans rely on the government to solve most of their problems. Weaned on a diet of material rewards,

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<sup>2</sup> Here it is pertinent for me to emphasise that when one considers the position of Singapore Indians and the problems they face, one inevitably thinks chiefly of the Tamils (and to a lesser extent the better-educated and more affluent Malayalees) who constitute the major Indian group. In fact the Tamils themselves believe that they alone constitute and represent Singapore's Indian community, especially with Tamil being one of Singapore's official languages. Tamil is therefore supposed to represent the Indian population in Singapore. While most of my interviewees are Tamils, I have ensured that 'expatriate' Indians and other local sub-ethnic groups are also suitably represented.

<sup>3</sup> From a speech by former Deputy Prime Minister and now Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the Harvard Club's 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner on 6 January 2004, as reported in *The Straits Times* of 7 January 2004.

many people find it easy to blame the government instead of coming forward with constructive ideas. Motivated by the state's new positive approach to topical issues, I have therefore embarked on the task of identifying the Indian response to 'racial' politics simply because no comprehensive literature exists on this sensitive topic.

What is important in the context of my thesis is how the various social engineering policies affect Singaporeans as they experience, perceive and negotiate the state's construction of their ethnic identity in relation to the nationalist imperative. Their views and responses can help us better understand how their lives are shaped by these issues. Though there has been growing open and public discourses on 'race' and ethnicity in the past two decades or so, such discourses have been dominated by political and community leaders. Moreover, one could detect a distinct reluctance, and even refusal, of mainstream studies to engage with issues of 'race' and ethnicity. The Indian presence has been researched in specific areas, but the ways in which Singapore Indians negotiate their ethnic identity in relation to national identity has never been documented. Moreover, while the 'desire' or 'will' of the ethnic groups has been repeatedly rationalized and articulated by the state to justify the implementation of official policies, little has been known or written about the feelings of Singapore Indians about these policies. My thesis aims to redress this gap and generate a scholarly discourse in this minefield of 'racial' politics.

### **Research Methodology and Fieldwork Experiences**

Competing discourses on race and ethnicity shaped my research strategies. In seeking to achieve the objectives of my thesis I adopted a variety of approaches. My research methodology incorporated a range of ethnographic research techniques, including the traditional historical research, questionnaire surveys (to provide broad-based quantitative data for analysis), participant observation, qualitative research in the form of both structured and unstructured interviews, and focus group interviews with a representative sample of groups and individuals interacting in the specific site of 'Little India' – a site that reveals varying landscapes, among which are Housing Board estates, shops, markets, hawker stalls, restaurants, parks, a community centre, places of worship (including a church, several Hindu temples and a mosque), prostitution, gambling (areas in back lanes), schools and modes of transport. Most of my interviews took place in this area though there were occasions when I conducted my fieldwork interviews outside the 'comfort zone'. My respondents included

Indians amongst whom were government officials, employees of state agencies and NGOs, professionals, journalists, tourists, retail merchants, expatriates, imported labourers, artists, politicians and other interest groups. Although this thesis is mainly an exploration of the Indian presence in Singapore in relation to the 'racial' politics of the colonial and postcolonial governments, I have also considered it appropriate to seek some responses from members of the other ethnic minority communities residing in Singapore as well as from the dominant community for the purpose of fullness and balance.

Let me now introduce my own orientation and positionality into the thesis and enumerate some interesting fieldwork experiences. An ethnic Indian, with parents migrating from India before the Second World War, I was born in what was then colonial Malaya and partly educated there in my early years. Subsequently I moved to British Singapore with my parents to continue my education and spent most of my life in post-colonial Singapore, working for the state there. My background is therefore that of an 'insider' as well as 'outsider', as I now live and study in New Zealand. Such a background also gives special meaning and significance to my research as I grew up in both the colonial and post-colonial periods of Singapore's history. My personal experiences have been the single most influential factor that inspired me to embark on this research, which has therefore opened up space for me to explore my own identity and ethnicity. Growing up and living amongst people of different ethnic backgrounds, I had always tried to reconcile my own ethnicity with the issue of 'race', though during my school days I was not made aware that I belonged to a particular 'race' and that I looked different from my peers. For this reason I have also decided to use myself as a source of information. But I hope my own voice adds to the mix and does not dominate the analysis, although I recognize of course that the thesis is mine and that other voices are mediated by my own.

What strikes me as significant is the fact that there is a serious dearth of documented literature about people's responses, experiences and perceptions on the theme of 'race' and ethnicity in Singapore. But, as I shall demonstrate in my thesis, this is hardly surprising given the 'regulated' atmosphere of the colonial regime as well as the independent nation, and the censorship directed to the talking about issues

of 'race' and ethnicity in public.<sup>4</sup> There is therefore a need to reconcile the documented and official political discourse on the one hand, and people's social and cultural experiences on the other. The importance of such reconciliation cannot be overemphasized and I have therefore striven to relate peoples' candid responses and views to the state's 'race'-based social engineering initiatives in as comprehensive a manner as possible. It will become clear that my interviewees' responses reflect the conflicts of an official rhetoric that seeks to reconcile the ideal of a common national identity and national integration with the celebration of ethnic difference and ethnic identity founded on the localized connotations attached to the colonial concept of 'race'.

Capturing these silent but powerful experiences of ordinary Singaporeans enables the production of rich cultural and historical insights not otherwise obtainable from documented sources in the context of Singapore's official image. Alvin Tan reiterates that "the existence of multiple histories can only strengthen Singapore historiography as a whole", while Thomson in *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* argues that a more realistic understanding and reconstruction of history results from recording the experiences of ordinary people who are normally ignored in published accounts. In his words, "oral history offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgement inherent in its traditions..."<sup>5</sup> Passerini analyses oral history in similar vein:

The raw material of oral history consists not just in factual statements, but is pre-eminently an expression and representation of culture, and therefore includes not only literal narratives, but also the dimensions of memory, ideology and subconscious desires.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The government frequently warns the public not to stir up distrust and enmity between the 'races' by uttering racist remarks. With the emphasis that race, language and religion remain sensitive issues in Singapore, the government is concerned that racist remarks send a "very wrong signal to all minorities in Singapore". (Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on 17 September 2005, as reported in *The Straits Times* of 18 September 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Alvin Tan Peng Hong, "'Allowing Dissonance' in Rethinking History – New Approaches and Tools in Understanding the Past," *The Historical Journal* (1998) (NUS Historical Society); Paul Richard Thomson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Luisa Passerini, "Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism," *History Workshop Journal* (Autumn 1979): 82-108.

My fieldwork in Singapore therefore proceeded from an anthropological angle, seeking to listen to, observe and understand people in their relevant social and cultural contexts. In this scenario, I was perfectly aware of my ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ status and the ethnic identity to which I belong. This ‘insider’/ ‘outsider’ boundary was constantly reinforced and contested during my fieldwork as it involved the sensitive question of power relationships. This was prompted by the assumption that being an ‘insider’ I would have the ‘appropriate’ cultural knowledge and thus a more correct understanding of the experiences of the participants as opposed to an ‘outsider’ who may lack the inner access to specific cultural knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Yet I also realized I was not just an “insider”, but someone with a complex set of multiple identities. Both my participants and I were reflections of the varied fragmentations that thrive within the ‘Indian’ community. However, participants had different historical experiences from mine, which allowed them scope to make distinctions. “But you are different from me”, or “My background is different from yours”, or “You were not born in India like me”, only made my ‘outsider’ position more evident. With this awkwardly unique position of being an ethnic insider-outsider as well as local-foreign (living and working in Singapore though born and partly educated in Malaysia, but now living and studying in New Zealand), I proceeded to negotiate and manipulate my multi-faceted situation so as to ensure a meaningful outcome of my research. Of course my personal and professional background as well as gender also impacted upon my fieldwork as I interviewed people from the varied strata of Singapore society. In short, I had to build a social relationship with my informants so as to elicit their cooperation and trust.

Although oral sources of information about issues of the day circulate in Singapore through private conversations between family members and friends, it is quite a different story when people are asked to air their views ‘in public’. While researching primary documentary resources and historical material at the National University of Singapore (NUS), I realized that many senior faculty, while extending their cooperation, preferred not to get involved in contemporary ‘racial’ politics. Officials of government organizations were also not keen to discuss my project in a proactive way. Several e-mails and letters written to these organizations remained

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<sup>7</sup> G Valentine, “People Like Us: Negotiating Sameness and Difference in Research Process”, in *Feminist Geography in Practice, Research and Methods*, ed. P Moss (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 116-126.

unanswered. I consider this unusual because government organisations in Singapore, of which I was a part during my service days in Singapore, have an enviable reputation for efficiency and promptness in dealing with the public. In the end, I had to literally knock on their doors, only to be referred to junior officers who were not much help. On the other hand, some government agencies, like the Urban Renewal Authority, Singapore Tourism Board, National University of Singapore Central Library, National Library Board and National Archives were more cooperative and helpful. Senior broadcast, TV and print media personnel were also not prepared to speak to me. Prominent citizens, Members of Parliament, people in senior Government positions, and those in the elite list of the Who's Who in Singapore were reluctant to be interviewed and have their comments recorded on audiotape. Citing reasons like work pressure and lack of time, the few who did agree preferred to record their views by electronic means like e-mail, but only on the condition of anonymity and confidentiality. Such behaviour on the part of the Singapore public stems from a generally perceived climate of fear that prevails in attitudes towards speaking out on controversial or 'sensitive' topics. This in part explains why inhabitants' social construction of Singapore has not been sufficiently researched. Interestingly, those who were most forthcoming with their views and perceptions were men/women-in-the-street Singaporeans who had a story to tell, but again who did so only on the guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity. I have respected this by changing the names of the respondents and interviewees for the purpose of this thesis.

In pursuing fieldwork, I encountered many interesting episodes, such as in the case of a local Indian shopper who strolled up to me and asked if I was an Indian tourist as he saw me taking photographs in 'Little India's Serangoon Road with its refurbished and quaint shophouses situated in narrow alleys. In another instance I was gazing at the awesome skyline of Singapore from the 18<sup>th</sup> floor of a HDB block of flats in Serangoon Road, when another Indian resident rushed up to me to ask if he could be of any assistance. Only when I assured him that all was fine with me was he relieved as he had feared that I was contemplating suicide. I used such encounters to strike up fruitful conversations and their resulting contributions to my fieldwork have been frank and constructive. In the highly structured and regimented nature of Singapore society suspicions about people and their motives abound. I was aware that sensitivity to power discrepancies could put the potential rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee in jeopardy, resulting in only cursory, defensive,



bland and politically correct answers from people who felt threatened and worried that a researcher, with institutional authority, would publish what they said. Therefore, sometimes I had to downplay my researcher role by adopting a passer-by anonymous role. Responding to this role, my interviewees were more forthcoming. This inherent facet of Singapore society sometimes became an inhibiting factor in my fieldwork there. Being an Indian, I found relatively easy access to Indians and this was a positive factor in my fieldwork as most of my respondents in the 'Little India' area were of Indian ethnicity. I also interviewed Malays, Chinese and other minority groups like Eurasians in Singapore. Interviewing Malays also presented no major difficulties because I read, write and speak in their native tongue. This factor guaranteed me some acceptance and legitimacy among Malay interviewees.

By contrast however, with the Chinese, who are the dominant group in Singapore, my ethnic background and my ignorance of Mandarin and other Chinese dialects became an obstacle to winning their confidence. Some Chinese residents gave me the cold shoulder when I sought to interview them. They felt uneasy about being interviewed by a stranger, particularly from a different ethnic background, even though I assured them of the confidentiality of the interview. This difficulty of my gaining access and acceptance to Chinese informants is, in my experience of living and working in Singapore, the result of a combination of structural, political, social, cultural, economic and historical factors. The reluctance to voice their views on topical or controversial issues to me, despite my attempted friendly demeanour and manners, was markedly pronounced. For instance, one middle-aged English-educated Chinese man, shopping at Mustafa Centre in 'Little India', suggested that I should not waste my time or his by discussing perceptions about Government policies. He told me to steer clear on such matters as the Government had "eyes and ears everywhere", possibly insinuating that I was an undercover Government agent sent out to ferret his views on issues of the day. Another Chinese, a businessman, told me to return to New Zealand and continue enjoying its pristine beauty and picturesque vistas of nature instead of dabbling in matters best left to the powers that be. There was also the interesting instance of a Chinese shopper who urged me to take up politics but to avoid becoming an opposition politician! Other researchers pursuing their fieldwork in the Singapore context have faced similar situations because of feelings of suspicion and mistrust towards those enquiring about peoples' perceptions of government policies. Even when convinced about my bona fides, there was a general reluctance

on the part of people, Chinese in particular, to discuss matters pertaining to state policies. Notwithstanding this tendency, there were some Chinese willing to share their candid perceptions of the Singapore urban landscape. Perhaps they saw this as a rare opportunity to express alternative views from an uninhibited perspective once they found me more as a friend than an inquisitive researcher. It is their voices that will lend credence to my thesis as well as helping to provide a much better understanding of how peoples' lives are shaped by state policies.

Ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken in Singapore, mostly in 'Little India', over a period of four years from 2001-2005 with about three months being devoted in each year for this purpose. For practical reasons, my methodology varied with the type of respondents interviewed. The Singaporean group of interviewees is divided into two main categories, one group who live and work within the confines of my study area and the other who do not. Respondents living and working in 'Little India' were mostly residents and shopkeepers. Interviewees who did not live and work in 'Little India' were selected so as to reflect a mix of people along gender, ethnic, educational and demographic divides. Coming from different social backgrounds they were chosen to minimize bias in eliciting information on questions of nationality, identity, heritage and sense of place. For the former group, there were several avenues of securing interviews. They ranged from street surveys and door-to-door surveys to personal contacts. Hawker centres (located in 'Little India's central market complex called Zhujiao Centre and now renamed Tekka Centre) and temples spread throughout 'Little India' also provided pathways of insight and formed a conducive counter-point to the world of image consumption accruing everywhere else in the glitzy shopping plazas spread throughout Singapore.

Open-ended questions were put to residents living and working in 'Little India', as they did not expect to be engaged in conversation when stopped on the streets or when they were in the midst of their meals in hawker centres or during prayer in the temples. They therefore gave brief answers to set questions enabling meaning-making and best capturing the spontaneity of the vernacular and everyday hustle and bustle of the area. In brief, there were more conversations than interviews. Respondents who were aware of my role as a researcher gradually became sufficiently comfortable with my presence to admit me into their worlds. I realized the importance of social interaction with my respondents, so my 'interviews' were not quite that in the traditional sense, but often took the form of informal conversations,

these conversations trammeling through pent-up frustrations and feelings about the ‘racialised’ environment as well as areas of work and politics. Sometimes my conclusions were not taken from what my respondents expressed to me verbally, but were gleaned from the manner in which they expressed their views. Furthermore, questions were never directed only at them. I too had to succumb to questions they may have cared to ask. In a sense, by speaking of my own personal experiences, I gained a better understanding of their lives than if I had maintained a professional distance. In sum, a good rapport was established with the interviewees, especially the shop owners and workers who were already familiar with me because of my frequent visits to ‘Little India’ during the fieldwork process. Interviews with people who lived or worked in ‘Little India’ revealed their strong sense of sentiment and attachment to the place and their opinions with regard to heritage conservation and ethnic interaction resulting from government policies. For interviewees who did not live and work in the field area, more structured interviews were possible because they were referred to by personal contacts. They understood the nature of my work and were more willing to sit down and talk with me in an informal setting.

Another set of open-ended in-depth narrative interviews was done with manual labourers and professional expatriates from the Indian sub-continent, as they were hesitant to divulge information through questionnaire surveys. Manual labourers were targeted to establish reasons for their crowding of ‘Little India’ on Sundays, while expatriates were asked to focus on their perceptions of the place. Many expatriates, for example, were afraid that their application for Permanent Residence status would be affected by participating through questionnaires. Similarly some foreign workers were not willing to answer questionnaires because they were illegal overstayers in Singapore and knew the harsh punishment (that is, mandatory caning) they could get from the courts if they were found out. Even when they were legally working in Singapore, they were not likely to talk to people with structured survey questions because of feelings of suspicion against strangers. They were usually afraid, suspecting that the researchers were from government agencies sent to check on them. It was therefore often necessary to engage in small talk and social pleasantries that looked seemingly out of context but which led to the opportunity for relevant questions and equally relevant viewpoints on pertinent issues. Open-ended in-depth narrative interview methods also allowed me to encourage the interviewees to talk at length in a ‘dialogical’ manner so that richer and more coherent information

could be elicited. Hence, while structured interviews and questionnaires appeared too sanitized a method to capture such sentiments comprehensively both for Singaporeans and for foreigners, a non-structured research technique that best draws upon the complexities present in the contact zone was relied upon in such cases. Sometimes I needed to use a contact person to break initial barriers and facilitate the flow of conversation, as with Bangladeshi and Indian workers. Though it was not intentional, most of my respondents were Tamil-speaking Indians who came from Chennai in Tamil Nadu, South India. My appearance as a 'typical' Indian from India and the fact that I had close relatives in India was an advantage in conducting interviews with these respondents. Sometimes I dressed in Indian garb (*dhoti* and *kurta*) when I went for interviews especially in temples along Serangoon Road.<sup>8</sup> Such a location and my Indian attire proved especially fruitful as the informants respected the sanctity of a religious site. I also made it a point to stress that my close relatives were in India. Often this point resulted in a discussion of native areas and made the interview atmosphere less intimidating. This made my respondents feel at ease and they treated me as one of them. As a result they were more forthcoming in their views. My age and educational level was neither an advantage nor a disadvantage in the case of the Indian professionals, as most of them were equally, if not more, educated.

Tourists were informally interviewed through street surveys. This group of respondents was interviewed so as to shed light on their interpretation of 'Little India' as a tourist site. Other sources of data are newspaper articles, guidebooks and speeches of key leaders, past and present, in Singapore. Newspapers are one way through which opinions of the public are expressed and constructed, and a key medium through which the elaboration of stereotypes and issues is pursued. Official guidebooks provide information relating to the sights, sounds and smells of the area as well as its history and heritage value, including the meaning of street names, even alluding to their date of naming.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, they project the ideological perspective of the government. Speeches of leaders often provide an indication of the official stand on issues such as heritage conservation, identity, 'racial' politics and foreign talent.

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<sup>8</sup> *Dhoti* refers to the white loincloth tied around the waist by Indian men; *kurta* refers to the long top worn over the trousers or *dhoti*.

<sup>9</sup> The most recent is Peter Dunlop's *Street Names of Singapore* (Singapore: Who's Who Publishing, 2000).

All interviews were recorded, predominantly in Tamil and to a lesser extent in English, on audiocassette tapes, and later transcribed. The interviews were held on a one-to-one basis except for focus group interviews and participant observation. Focus group interviews consisting of five to ten people were mainly with foreign workers. Most of these interviews were carried out in a public park in 'Little India' where many gathered every Sunday, the one day of the week foreign workers were not required to work, while a few interviews took place in their homes. The settings in which the interviews were held were carefully chosen to ensure that my interviewees were comfortable and familiar with their surroundings. Topics ranged from their lifestyles to job-related problems to their experiences with local Singaporeans. This type of interview was advantageous as it offered different insights into 'Little India' compared to the qualitative interviews. The sheer number of these workers at an interview encouraged spontaneous exchange of information because they could relate to or counteract one another's experiences. At the end of the interview, which usually took about one to two hours, diverse but coherent accounts were given.

Participant observation, adopted as an approach in conjunction with other research procedures, was also useful in providing valuable information to my study. As Schutt says,

Participating, observing, listening, talking and thinking, without special questionnaires give the field research its naturalness and unique and enduring appeal, allow the researcher to learn about and experience the social world of the... participants.<sup>10</sup>

Participant observation was carried out at different times. Observation of shops, streets, lanes, food courts, verandah or five-foot way activities and places of worship was carried out. The fieldwork was done on weekdays and weekends at different times of the day so as to allow for comparative analysis of the intensity of interactions between the various groups. Moreover, participant observation that is time sensitive sheds light on important issues like the gradual colonization of space in 'Little India' by foreign workers on weekends and weekdays, and how 'Little India' takes on different personalities at different times of the day and week. Information obtained was used to crosscheck and supplement data from the questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews.

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<sup>10</sup> R K Schutt, *Investigating the Social World: The Process and Practice of Research* (California: Thousand Oaks, 1996), 312.

Having laid down the methodologies adopted and the problems encountered, I will now delve into the core areas of the study. But before embarking on this task, let me define some important concepts that inform my thesis.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Two theoretical concepts that provide valuable insights into the cultural and sociopolitical manifestations of urban life and everyday practices in colonial and postcolonial Singapore help structure my thesis. They are firstly, the terms, “social production of space” and “social construction of space” (coined by Setha Low<sup>11</sup>), and secondly, the Gramscian concept of hegemony. These concepts merit some elaboration here not only because they help us understand the cultural and sociopolitical forces prevailing from colonial to postcolonial times in Singapore, but also because they signify the relationship between space and power as well as between domination and resistance. I draw together these theoretical insights and apply them to the Singapore context.

### **Social production of space and social construction of space**

Setha Low emphasizes an anthropological approach to the built environment, arguing for the necessity of two mutually complementary perspectives: the *social production*, and *social construction* of space as “tools for understanding how public space in urban society becomes semiotically encoded and interpreted reality”.<sup>12</sup> She defines the social production of space as including “all those factors – social, economic, ideological and technological – the intended goal of which is the physical creation of the material setting”. Her definition of the social construction of space is equally succinct - it is “the actual transformation of space – through people’s social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of the material setting – into scenes and actions that convey social meaning”. Low explores the cultural meaning of the urban environment by probing the relationship between the experience of individuals and the sociopolitical and economic processes generating spatial form and organization. Underpinning this analysis is the search for what she calls “the underlying social and

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<sup>11</sup> Setha Low, *Spatializing Culture*. 861-879.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

cultural values and power politics that give form and meaning to... the built urban environment”.<sup>13</sup>

Other theorists describe the same distinction in different ways, all seeing the built environment as an integral part of social life. According to Habraken, intimate and unceasing interaction between people and the forms they inhabit uniquely defines any built environment.<sup>14</sup> Lefebvre sees the built environment as “permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations but it is also producing and produced by social relations”<sup>15</sup>, while McDonogh and Rotenberg explore “the meaning of urban spaces through the knowledge of the people who live within them”.<sup>16</sup> As sociologist Ian Welsh puts it, the environment is “a site of intersecting and competing social and cultural definitions and interests”.<sup>17</sup> In more theoretical vein, sociologist Manuel Castells, for instance, focuses on the interpretation and perception of the present-day capitalist city by its inhabitants, who socially construct the city through their actions based on these concepts and interpretations. Castells argues that the city “is the space of collective alienation ... transformed ... into a flow that never stops and never starts”.<sup>18</sup>

While the built environment in Singapore, first as a colonial city and later as a rapidly developing planned city state, has been in one way created by its rulers, the social practices of its inhabitants have also influenced their own varying constructions of the environment. The processes of the social production of space and social construction of space convey meanings and provide insights as different groups and sociopolitical forces attempt to control and define urban spaces in the negotiation and representation of their respective realities and values. In the context of Singapore, both these processes are contested for economic and ideological reasons.

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<sup>13</sup> Setha M Low, “Constructing Difference: Spatial Boundaries and Social Change in Two Costa Rican Plazas” in *Setting Boundaries: The Anthropology of Spatial and Social Organization*, ed. Deborah Pellow (Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 1996), 161-178.

<sup>14</sup> N J Habraken, *The Structure of the Ordinary* (Mass: MIT Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> H Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D Nicholson Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Gary W McDonogh and Robert Louis Rotenberg, *The Cultural Meaning of Urban Space* (Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Ian Welsh, *Environment and Society in Eastern Europe* (Harlow, Essex: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (London: Arnold, 1983), 314.

Understanding these reasons can help us better understand the forces at work in the organization and consumption of space in this small but complex island city-state. Consequently the social organization of space and the meanings of knowledge, group and power in Singapore are brought into focus in the search for the underlying social and cultural values and power politics that give form and meaning to the cityscape and the built urban environment. Instead of one meaning of the city, diverse and contradictory meanings exist.

In the context of this thesis, the social production of space will be represented by the social engineering policies of the state while public responses will constitute the social construction of space. These two concepts underline one main thrust of my argument – that ‘race’ politics, as generated through the built environment, has characterized political governance in Singapore from the colonial past to the postcolonial nation-state of today. Consequently, I will in each chapter revisit these two concepts so as to interrogate the relationship between the ‘contested realities’ in Singapore’s history.

## **Hegemony**

The Gramscian concept of hegemony has been defined, in the words of one author, as “the predominance obtained by consent rather than force of one class or group over other classes”, based on consent for the “values, norms, perceptions and beliefs... of [the] central authority” – a consent secured through ideological means.<sup>19</sup> It therefore refers to the condition in which power is not based merely on coercion (which Gramsci sees as mere “domination”) but on a certain level of voluntary acceptance and consent on the part of those ruled. The idea of ‘hegemony’ deserves attention here because constructing hegemony was of vital importance for the British in Singapore, as it was in their other colonies, most notably in India. As a tool of governance, it was pivotal to the very structure of colonialism which, as noted by Alatas, is also a “control of the mind of the conquered or subordinated”.<sup>20</sup> In a strikingly similar fashion, the government of the new nation state has, since 1965, constructed a post-colonial society whereby it seeks to control all aspects of political,

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph V Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 24-39.

<sup>20</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (London: Frank Cass, 1977), 17.



economic and social behaviour in the country by what Lisa Lim calls “a successful practice of hegemony”.<sup>21</sup> The people have been persuaded by the governing People’s Action Party (PAP) that it is working for the general and public good of the nation, and that the party’s values, ideas and methods for attaining this public good are the most ‘natural’ and ‘commonsensical’ – what is often called ‘ideological hegemony’ in which the social order fostered by the state is also endorsed and accepted by the majority.<sup>22</sup>

Both the colonial and postcolonial ideological projects in Singapore have been hegemonically produced. British colonial officials made extensive use of ideas and beliefs of colonialism towards achieving their objectives of political and economic domination in Singapore. These were ideologies based on class and race, expressed mainly through political power rather than force, and implemented by specific methods and tactics to manipulate and enforce social control among the diverse ethnic groups. The colonial administration in Singapore constructed hegemony in several ways, perhaps most significantly by the act of segregating the races and naming streets in the Raffles 1822 Town Plan. British hegemonic rule in Singapore was, as noted by several historians, exercised both through coercion and negotiation. This process ensured that only selected ethnic leaders (comprising mainly a handful of the wealthy professional and business Chinese) were represented on the Municipal Committee that passed rules and regulations concerning ethnic interests. It has been argued that their presence on the Municipal Committee – considered a “representative” body – gave the appearance of mass support for British policies.<sup>23</sup> Benefiting from the status and positions conferred on them by the colonial officials, this elite group of “local representation” did not advance the working classes’ or other

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<sup>21</sup> Lisa Lim Bee Fong, “Hegemony, Dominance and Resistance in Singapore: Pulau Ubin as a Case Study,” *Maintaining Political Dominance in Singapore: A Gramscian Analysis* (Unpublished Honors Thesis, National University of Singapore, 2003): 6. She shows in the example of the drive to keep Avian influenza out of Singapore how a modern society such as Singapore is ruled on the basis of “a combination of coercion and consent”.

<sup>22</sup> Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Construction of “Nation”* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> See Edwin Lee, *The British as Rulers: Governing Multiracial Singapore 1867 – 1914* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1991); Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore* (Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

ethnic groups' interests or challenge the racialized aspects of colonial policies to any significant degree.

The government of the Singapore nation state on the other hand goes about constructing hegemonic control and discipline of its citizens by an emphasis on diversity and 'race' politics via a deliberate policy of social engineering in various social, economic and education reforms. Virtually ruling unopposed since 1959 (when self-government was first achieved), the government of the PAP-controlled state has secured acceptance by its citizens using a top-down approach structuring all aspects of government policy. In sum, it can be said that whereas the British saw it expedient that their narrative be accepted by the few that mattered, the independent nation state has imposed its narrative on the silent majority. In both the colonial and postcolonial regimes, ideology has been used as the instrument of manipulation for hegemonic control of the population and exercised by a process of what Clammer calls "classifying" – The Raffles Town Plan by the colonial administration and a regulated system of social engineering by the nation state.<sup>24</sup> It can therefore be argued in the Singapore context that both colonial and postcolonial regimes have operated not only through coercion but also through extracting the consent of the governed (a select group or the majority) to the broad ideological stance of those in power.

Hegemony is reflected not only in the way control is exercised by the rulers, but also how it is received by the ruled. Narratives of colonial dominance have tended to downplay the responses of the colonized peoples in Singapore to colonial urban planning practices.<sup>25</sup> Yeoh explains that the seeming silence of colonized locals is partly the result of a paucity of formal records documenting the strategies adopted by colonized groups to contest the actions of the colonial government. Only the colonialists' action is visible, flowing through what Anthony Giddens calls, "the institutional mediation of power...running silently through the repetition of institutionalised practices" over the colonised peoples.<sup>26</sup> As cultural and ideological projects, 'institutionalised practices' were carried out by various colonial institutions

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<sup>24</sup> John R Clammer, *Singapore: Ideology, Society, Culture* (Singapore: Chopmen, 1985), 165.

<sup>25</sup> Yeoh, *Contesting Space*.

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence, Volume Two of a Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 9.

that influenced the lives of colonised peoples and the shape of their built environment. Kay Anderson calls these strategies of control “cultural hegemony,” colonial strategies that manipulate and control various aspects of the built environment.<sup>27</sup> Similar strategies continue in the governance of present-day independent Singapore as this thesis will demonstrate.

Such dominance suppresses those who invest the landscape with meanings and representations different from that of the dominant power. Smith and Tardanico have observed that what is suppressed has been the “impact of common people – their consciousness, intentionality, everyday practices, and collective action – on the planning and implementation of state and business policies as well as their consequences for the social production of cities”.<sup>28</sup> This neglect of the presence of the colonised is apparent in many studies of the colonial city. In colonial Singapore, daily management of the built environment was controlled by the municipal authorities who exercised a form of disciplinary power, what Foucault calls “pastoral power,” that was concerned with the organisation of space.<sup>29</sup> The colonial power, by organising, distributing and partitioning communities, proposed how reality was to be perceived by the inhabitants in Singapore. In particular the colonial administration claimed the right to construct social and racial categories by ascribing racial identities and apportioning space along racial lines. By imposing such social and spatial restrictions that permeated both the public and private domains of the colonised communities in Singapore, they contributed to what Foucault calls, in a wider context, an “objectivizing of the subject” through “dividing practices”.<sup>30</sup> To counteract such practices, he argues that “local arenas of action” exercise power through their own counter-strategies that challenge the actions of the dominant power and modify their effect. He calls this “revolts to the gaze”, contending that resistance to power “is all the more real and effective because they [it is] formed right at the point where

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<sup>27</sup> Kay J. Anderson, “Cultural Hegemony and the Race-Definition Process in Chinatown, Vancouver: 1880-1990,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 6 (1988): 28.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Peter Smith and Richard Tardanico, “Urban Theory Reconsidered: Production, Reproduction and Collective Action” in *The Capitalist City: Global Restructuring of Community Politics*, eds. Michael Peter Smith and Joe R. Feagin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 105.

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, eds. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 213-215.

<sup>30</sup> Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, 208.

relations of power are exercised”.<sup>31</sup> These arguments have also been echoed by Giddens who contends that colonised subjects “can bring to bear strategies of their own, and apply specific types of sanctions”, despite being branded as ignorant.<sup>32</sup> Gramsci, too, emphasizes that hegemony is never fully achieved because groups not in power will always challenge those in power. Likewise, Jon Goss has argued that the meanings of the built environment cannot be fully captured by any single privileged discourse. Instead it should be, according to him, viewed as a complex ‘multicoded space’ that is continually reinterpreted in ‘everyday usage...by everyday people who may be “reading” or “writing” different languages in the built environment’.<sup>33</sup>

What we can draw out from these theories of power and resistance is that while power is exercised through the control and manipulation of the built environment, resistance and negotiation arise when interests collide. In response, the governing elite will also oppose and contest ideas and developments that threaten or undermine its agenda. As contested terrain, the colonial landscape in Singapore is appropriately summed up by Yeoh and Kong as not only articulating “the ideological intent of the powerful who plan and shape the landscape in particular ways” but also “reflects the everyday meanings implicit in the daily routines of ordinary people associated with the landscape”.<sup>34</sup> In this urban landscape various elements of the colonial built environment were differentially perceived and interpreted by powerful colonial agents and by the various communities based on their own values, attitudes, priorities and resources.

Yet it would be reductionist to describe the relationship between the coloniser and colonised as only characterized by oppression and conflict, as Yeoh appears to argue. For example, she sees the urban built environment of colonial Singapore produced through “the dialectics of power” – what she calls, an encounter “between municipal attempts at imposing social and spatial control... and Asian agency in

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<sup>31</sup> Foucault, “Power and Strategies” in *Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), 142.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 288; *The Nation-State and Violence*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Jon Goss, “The Built Environment and Social Theory: Towards an Architectural Geography,” *Professional Geographer* 40 (1988): 398.

<sup>34</sup> Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Lily Kong, “Reading Landscape Meanings: State Constructions and Lived Experiences in Singapore’s Chinatown,” *Habitat International* 18, 4 (1994): 7.

wresting concessions and asserting its own view of urban life”.<sup>35</sup> She views the period of colonial rule as one of sustained conflict and contestation between the colonial administration’s spatial strategies of social control and surveillance against the routine social and cultural practices of the various communities. Overly privileging the locals’ oppositional stance, she obscures the lines of communication between the local communities and the British by focusing on the strategies adopted by some in the Chinese community to colonial laws. The colonial power is therefore seen, in her perspective, as a structure of oppression and the colonised a field of opposition. Such a narrative tends to downplay antagonisms and discriminations between the colonized themselves, especially in their varied dealings with the colonial power. The ‘divide and rule’ policy of colonial segregation was, for example, sometimes supported by the dominant subaltern group against others.

Yeoh’s perspective is representative of the tendency common among post-colonial writers in former colonies to adopt a rhetoric that seeks to put their once colonial masters in an overly negative position. But it also serves to overly unify the colonized, obscuring the power of various dominant elites or racialized groups amongst them and their monopolization of (or even rationalising) the narrative of national liberation. The authoritarian policies initiated by the PAP Government, when it came into power in 1959, made it imperative that local writers fall in line with its post-colonial discourse. Consequently, vernacular historians, anthropologists and cultural geographers in Singapore began to produce revisionist historical writings that routinely presented contestations and conflicts between, on the one hand, the dominated ethnic communities and on the other the colonial administration. This is partly because the creation of new national subjects by the nation state produces an emotionally charged environment whereby the government of the day is determined to undo the colonial ‘legacy’ and project its own image of a potential and progressive developmental state. In line with this scenario and the nationalist struggle that preceded it, the government strives to mobilize the masses with a nationalist ideology by destabilizing vestiges of colonial influence and setting ambitious plans and targets to promote national development in housing, industries, education, defence, social cohesion and various other facets of public life. Vernacular writers nurtured in this setting therefore emulate a developmentalist discourse that justifies, in their eyes, the

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<sup>35</sup> Yeoh and Kong, “Reading Landscape Meanings”, 8.

creation of a nation state by writing a colonial past that saw little improvement in the living conditions of the ethnic communities. A negative view of colonial development is narrated, for instance, in the constant use of the word “slum” that occurs with regular consistency in contemporary government rhetoric as well as in academic and literary works in Singapore. Usage of the word obscures the fact that these so-called “slums” were also sites of dense social relationships and connections for their inhabitants. They were not necessarily ‘dysfunctional’ but also nurtured and promoted order, solidarity and cohesion within and between various ethnic communities in Singapore. The single-minded zeal with which the so-called ‘slum clearance’ was carried out did dislocate and traumatize some families. They were not just disadvantaged socially but also in terms of their livelihood. But there were also positive aspects to slum clearance. Many of the children of the dwellers from slums and coolie lines (Indians included) appear to be grateful to the postcolonial government for rescuing them from the wretchedness of their previous existence and installing them in new and immaculately presented HDB (Housing and Development Board) apartments and for the relatively higher standard of living in the new environment. Independent Singapore now is outstanding testimony to cleanliness and social order, not only because of the state’s hegemonic controls, but also because, it can be argued, notions of civic duty, compliance with the law, orderliness, cleanliness, hygiene, and love of peace and stability are attributes ordinary Singaporeans of today started imbibing from colonial times. In other words, the seeds of the present order and hegemonic stability in Singapore were planted by British administrators in their relations with local communities during the colonial period.

There is no doubt, as historical records show, that some of the colonial administration’s policies and regulations were opposed, mainly by the Chinese community. Several contentious issues were settled by negotiation and coercion. Examples of such issues that unpack the meaning, reception and acceptance of the colonial power by the Asian communities can be seen in racial zoning and segregation of the various communities, in the economic policies of the administration, naming of streets and places, burial grounds, various built forms like dwelling houses and the five-foot way or verandah, sanitation, disease prevention and control, water supply, drainage, suppression of immoral activities, law and order, management of liquor licensing, in the appointment of the *kapitan* (or Chinese village headman) system, and in appointments to the Municipal Committee .

There were of course more belligerent and radical nationalist voices that openly opposed and criticized colonial and postcolonial rule and in these instances the colonial administration and subsequently the nation state came down hard on such elements, thereby illustrating the fact that strong coercive and somewhat violent measures were administered by both regimes to suppress and contain reactionary elements in Singapore society. During the colonial period, for example, the verandah became a site of everyday conflict and resistance leading to the so-called verandah riots of 1888. The British administration also waged a relentless battle against communist elements that operated underground and opposed colonial rule in what was then peninsula Malaya. This was the Communist 'Emergency' that was mainly confined to Malaya. In Singapore the postcolonial state has similarly crushed several class-based and other opposing factions. Examples are rioting communist inspired left-wing Chinese high school students, the Hock Lee bus riots, chauvinistic activists from the leftist opposition Barisan Sosialist party, restless Trade Union activists who preached anti-government rhetoric and staged demonstrations, university lecturers and intellectuals who openly criticized government policies, extremist elements that tried to disturb multiracial peace and harmony between the various ethnic groups by using race and religion to propagate discontent, intimidation and arrest of opposition politicians and dissidents who advocated leftist ideologies and opposed PAP rule, and local newspapers and international magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* that were critical of government policies.

How has the nation state been able to achieve this hegemonic state of affairs? The former Prime Minister tells us how he thinks it happened:

I have often been accused of interfering with private lives. I say without the slightest of remorse we would not have made economic progress if we did not intervene on very personal matters who your neighbour is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit, or what language you use. We decide what is right. Never mind what the people think. That's another problem.

- Lee Kuan Yew, PM of Singapore, National Day Rally, 1986.

The nation state rules by hegemony – trading economic/material progress for freedom. The PAP, Singapore's one-party government, makes no apologies about its social engineering policies to ensure the survival and competitiveness of the national economy. In fact, the Singaporean nation state can be considered to have achieved phenomenal success at engineering a system of values and practices by a subtle

process of hegemony secured through ideological means and enforced through an artful fusion of coercion, compulsion and consent. The state commonly uses the term ‘dialogue’ to denote these hegemonic processes. As Tremewan has noted,

The ordering of society is most effectively achieved by consent. However, when consent is not forthcoming or the ordering process requires the rapid breakdown of existing social relations, then various degrees of coercion become necessary.<sup>36</sup>

The post-colonial state has dominated all aspects of political, economic, social and cultural life in Singapore since taking over the reins of power from the colonial regime. Adopting authoritarian and paternalistic ways as opposed to western-style values supposedly based on individual rights, the state has monopolized public discourse by a dynamic and successful process of hegemonic control that ensures its political dominance. Such hegemony has been practised through an ideology built on ideas of pragmatism, elitism, meritocracy, collectivism, ethnic essentialism, state-directed industrialization and integration with global capitalism. The ruling party has achieved a hegemony so complete and a rule so successful – at least by its own reckoning – that it has become difficult to conceive of other alternatives, which could only be seen as options for failure, if not chaos and anarchy. This fear of the alternative has remained a dominant feature of Singapore’s official political rhetoric to the present day, and is a central feature of the PAP’s legitimating technique. Vasil comments that the PAP “views itself and is seen by many Singaporeans as the unchallenged national party”.<sup>37</sup> The state controls all the intermediary institutions that articulate the interests of the people and to ensure its hegemonic dominance it has in force strict censorship and other rules that stifle dissent and free expression. The continued dominance of the ruling party since independence can be attributed to the structures and systems of governance that provide for “draconian systems of political, social and economic control,” so much so that Trocki considers Singapore to be one of the most intensely controlled societies in the world.<sup>38</sup> He exposes the paradox of a

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<sup>36</sup> Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore* (London and New York: St Martin’s Press, 1994), 187.

<sup>37</sup> Raj Vasil, *Governing Singapore: Democracy and National Development* (Singapore: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 17.

<sup>38</sup> Mark T Berger, on *Singapore’s Authoritarian Capitalism, Asian Values, Free Market Illusions and Political Dependency*, by Christopher Lingle (Barcelona: Edicions Sirocco, S.L; Fairfax, Va.: The



free enterprise economy blending with a very rigorously policed and controlled social formation system. The workings of PAP hegemony are based on what Lingle calls “paternalistic nationalism and authoritarian capitalism”.<sup>39</sup> In short, the state by offering a hegemonic vision for Singapore’s future has become barely distinguishable from the personality of the one-party PAP political leadership.

The hegemony of the state dictates the practice of control, discipline and surveillance through the instruments of social engineering in realizing Foucault’s idea of disciplinary technology or what Castells describes as political intervention.<sup>40</sup> It has also been termed “calibrated coercion” in the Singapore context, because even as the state “maintains and updates its arsenal of coercive powers”, it calibrates its coercion “to get the job done with as little force as necessary”, in the words of George Cherian.<sup>41</sup> The ‘illiberal’ democratic system of the PAP Government coupled with its ‘soft authoritarianism’ stance, as noted by Mutalib, has been responsible for instilling a culture of fear, obedience and caution in the minds of ordinary citizens.<sup>42</sup> This has been achieved by various judicial processes and legal measures of coercion including detention without trial, criminal law<sup>43</sup> and defamation law<sup>44</sup>, the stifling of creativity and intellectual endeavour, confining the notion of civil society within the boundaries

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Locke Institute, 1996) in *Journal of Asian Studies* 56, 3 (August 1997): 853-854; Carl A Trocki, *Singapore: Wealth, Power and the Culture of Control* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Lingle, *Singapore’s Authoritarian Capitalism, Asian Values, Free Market Illusions and Political Dependency* (Barcelona: Edicions Sirocco, S.L; Fairfax, Va.: The Locke Institute, 1996).

<sup>40</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Developmental City-State in an Open World Economy: The Singapore Experience* (Berkeley, Calif.: Berkeley Roundtable on the International Economy, University of California, Berkeley, 1988).

<sup>41</sup> George Cherian, *Calibrated Coercion and the Maintenance of Hegemony in Singapore* (Asia Research Institute, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Hussin Mutalib, *Parties and Politics: A Study of Opposition Parties and the PAP in Singapore* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003), 12-13, 352-353.

<sup>43</sup> Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, 206-209.

<sup>44</sup> This law serves to incriminate political opponents and those who hold opposing views. The usage of this law has been particularly rampant during electioneering thereby restricting the fundamental freedoms of speech and expression guaranteed by the Constitution. (Tremewan, 1994, 206-209; Mauzy and Milne, 2002, 134-136; George, 2000, 102-114; Gomez, 67; Mutalib, 2003, 355-357). Clamping down on non-hegemonic political expression – Gomez calls it “intolerance for opposing points of views”- defamation law came into play again most recently with the governing PAP suing one of the opposition parties in the 2006 General Elections; James Gomez, *Shame*, ed. Gomez (Singapore: Think Centre, 2000), 67; Diane Mauzy and Robert Milne, *Singapore Politics Under the People’s Action Party* (London: Routledge, 2002), 134-136.

of the ruling party, and the cultivation of a “citizenry [that] is not proactive”.<sup>45</sup> In the words of Mutalib, “The Government of Singapore, because of its elite unity and high degree of integration, exercises sovereign and supreme power over the entire state apparatus”.<sup>46</sup> While there appears to be a reducing trend of authoritarianism and an opening up of the political system, political pundits do not anticipate any elimination of it because it has served the PAP Government well in maintaining hegemony.<sup>47</sup>

The Singapore state has always been intensely interventionist in economic, social and cultural terms in its management of ethnicity and of national development. Realizing that hegemony of economic discourse based on the hegemony of the state’s survivalist logic was crucial for national identity construction, the PAP Government decided that it should control all instruments and centres of power, without allowing the growth of political pluralism.<sup>48</sup> To this end various legislative measures were passed and various instrumentalities and government agencies created to implement its national-building policies. As Chan observes, “right from the start the PAP government showed an understanding of the equation linking legitimacy to performance and performance to state building and political capability”.<sup>49</sup> This legitimization process has been labeled in a variety of ways: administrative<sup>50</sup>, instrumentalist<sup>51</sup>, authoritarian<sup>52</sup>, corporatist<sup>53</sup>, developmentalist<sup>54</sup>, non-democratic<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Gomez, *Shame*, 68-73; Almond and Verba [Gabriel A Almond and S Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1963)], and Almond and Powell [Gabriel A Almond and G Bingham Powell, *Comparative Politics* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1966)], have observed that the climate of fear and caution has been reflected in the development of the political culture in Singapore – attributed by many to political apathy and the low political participation rate. Hence there is, in their opinion, a very pliant citizenry powerless to influence laws.

<sup>46</sup> Mutalib, *Parties and Politics*, 15.

<sup>47</sup> Mauzy and Milne, *Singapore Politics under the People’s Action Party*, 142; Mutalib, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Raj Vasil, *Governing Singapore*.

<sup>49</sup> Chan Heng Chee, “Politics in an Administrative State: Where has the Politics Gone?” in *Trends in Singapore*, ed. Seah Chee Meow (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975).

<sup>50</sup> Chan Heng Chee, “Politics in an Administrative State”.

<sup>51</sup> Chua Beng Huat and Eddie Kuo, *The Making of a New Nation: Cultural Construction and National Identity in Singapore Department of Sociology*, Working Paper no. 104. (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 1991); David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>52</sup> Garry Rodan, “Preserving the One-Party State in Contemporary Singapore” in *Southeast Asia in the 1990s: Authoritarianism, Democracy & Capitalism*, eds. Kevin Hewison, Richard Robison and Garry

and illiberal democracy.<sup>56</sup> The PAP's control of the state has effectively undermined any form of political opposition in Singapore – all political participation and policy debates are severely limited and made exclusive to the PAP regime. The ideology of economic growth and prosperity based on ideologies of survival and of pragmatism are translated into providing material incentives, political stability and social security through various social engineering policies. The PAP-controlled state has implemented these ideologies and strategies virtually unchallenged to the extent that the party has been overwhelmingly reelected to government ever since it came to power. In yet another show of hegemonic strength at the run-up to the 2006 General Elections, the ruling party has relied on ideology as strategy to capture all 84 seats in Parliament. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said on 9 April 2006, “We have policies, we have directions. We know what we will be doing for Singapore, for the people”.<sup>57</sup>

My research shows that many hegemonic aspects of colonial administration have been inherited by the postcolonial nation state. These include the practices of ‘Asian’ values, urban planning, housing policy, education and multi-lingual policy, the creation of racial categories, the English educated/Chinese educated divide and self-help, all of which will be analysed and discussed in subsequent chapters. With historical and empirical evidence, I will demonstrate how important these values and practices are in contributing to the understanding of present-day Singapore and the Singapore ‘Indian’.

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Rodan (St. Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1993); Mauzy and Milne, *Singapore Politics Under the People's Action Party*, 128.

<sup>53</sup> David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>54</sup> Martin Perry, Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State* (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 1997).

<sup>55</sup> Samuel P Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

<sup>56</sup> Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Mutalib, *Parties and Politics*.

<sup>57</sup> *The Straits Times*, 10 April 2006.

## Thesis Structure

The structure of this thesis uses a framework whereby the built environment in Singapore is examined and interrogated from a combination of social constructionist and social production perspectives.

To set the scene, I explore the Colonial city in Part I. Titled *Segregation, 'Race' and the Colonial City*, Part 1 comprises Chapters 1-3. For these chapters I have relied on the historical research of several writers both colonial and local, including works by Brenda Yeoh, Lily Kong, Victor Savage, Wong Lin Ken, Ernest Chew, Edwin Lee, C B Buckley, B W Hodder, C M Turnbull, K S Sandhu, A Mani, Siddique and Purushotam. Chapter 1 provides a brief historical backdrop of Singapore in colonial days. It discusses how colonial Singapore provided the scenario for the creation of a new nation state in 1965. In Chapter 2, I focus on the subject of migration from the Indian sub-continent, and how and why various classes of Indians, namely, the convict labourers, the traders and the professionals migrated to Singapore. This chapter then articulates the evolution of the area around Serangoon Road as the main concentration of Indians, and explores the 'ethnic' significance of this district. Chapter 3 analyses the construction of the colonial economy by the British authorities. By the process of hegemony, the colonialist ideology manifested in the creation of the 1822 Raffles Town Plan, under whose aegis the 'ethnic' communities, including the Indians, were 'racially' segregated into various geographical zones according to their occupational interests. This 'divide and rule' policy of the colonial project was extended via the system of street-naming and regulation of other urban built forms like the bungalow, the *attap* hut, the shophouse, and the five-foot way or verandah.

Part II, titled *'Integration', 'Race' and Ethnicity in the Nation State*, comprises Chapters 4-8 and deals with the 'social production of space' and the 'social construction of space' in the pluralistic society of the Singapore nation state. It looks at contemporary Singapore showing how the apartheid developments begun by the colonial administration have been euphemistically perpetuated by a paternalistic postcolonial government in its ideological creation of a new nation state. Various social engineering initiatives were introduced by the state in line with its ideology.

In Chapter 4 I will explore the meaning of 'Indian' in the context of the state's multiracial, multicultural ideology of 'race' politics. A sizeable number of Singapore Indians are torn between an ethnic identification that has diasporic connotations and a national identification in which they feel hopelessly subsumed by the majority. How

do they go about reconciling and negotiating their complex identities? I will first examine the built environment of the 'Indians' in Singapore and then analyse its inherent contradictions to demonstrate how such contradictions pose a dilemma to the identity of Indians in a 'multiracial', multicultural Singapore. The Singapore 'Indian' is often the subject of a diasporic consciousness brought about by the emphasis on 'race' and other factors that complicate the construction of national ideology. The built environment of the 'Indians' in Singapore is juxtaposed against a multiethnic connection in a space setting in which rapid social change, state policies and interethnic relations play a major part. This chapter will then discuss how the 'Indian' community in Singapore manages the negotiation of identities within the framework of a 'multiracial'/multicultural ideology of nation building. I will in this process demonstrate how the subject of 'racial' politics has become a site of struggle between ethnic identity and national identity.

Chapter 5 will set the pace by exploring the concept of 'race' introduced by the British. This was an ideology of race theory based on an Orientalist discourse of superiority over colonized subjects – a discourse that led to negative stereotyping of the 'races' and which became infused in the ideology and practices of the new nation state. How and why has this concept become a social reality for Singaporeans in the new nation state in the context of 'ethnicity'? 'Racial' politics in independent Singapore is anchored in the project of 'multiracialism' along with multiculturalism, multilingualism and multireligiosity. Designed to forge national identity and 'racial' harmony on the basis of separate but equal 'races', informants contend that this ideological project in fact reinforces and promotes 'ethnic' exclusivity.

With 'race' as the basis of all social classification in the pursuit of the ideology of multiracialism and national identity, Chapter 6 will explore some social engineering policies and programs introduced by the postcolonial state in line with its corporatist management of ethnicity. Specifically I will argue how a discourse of scientific racism underlined the introduction of population and family policies, immigration and promotion of Chinese cultural values as the basis of economic growth and social stability. Responses from my correspondents reveal the contestations and conflicts over such policies.

In Chapter 7 I will discuss more 'race'-based policies introduced by the state to enable it to exercise political and social control and pursue its version of a nation building identity based on survival, economic growth and social stability. An analysis

of policies in housing as well as language and education will demonstrate how they have become a site of conflict between ethnic identity and national identity as shown in the responses from my informants.

Chapter 8, the final chapter, examines the policies of self-help and heritage conservation and questions how and why the Indian community's dilemma over conflicting identities is reinforced in these policies.

## **PART I**

### **SEGREGATION, 'RACE' AND THE COLONIAL CITY**

## CHAPTER 1

### COLONIAL ORIGINS TO NATION STATE – A PREVIEW

#### 1.1 Singapore – The Colonial City

In Part 1 of this thesis I present a brief historical background to Singapore's development from colonial times as a prelude to my research on the 'racial' politics that has governed both the colonial administration and the postcolonial nation state. Chapter 1 offers a critical re-reading of Singapore's historical and colonial legacy and its impact on postcolonial society.

##### 1.1.1 History and Politics

Singapore's modern history according to the colonial perception began in 1819 when Raffles decided on the island as a settlement. Fearing resurgence of expansionism by the Dutch – who had been the dominant European trading power in the region for nearly 200 years – Raffles argued for an increased British presence, which he was promptly given. Popularly considered its founder, he obtained, in 1824, on behalf of the East India Company, full sovereignty of the island from Sultan Hussein and Temenggong Abdul Rahman of Johor.<sup>1</sup> Raffles saw its immense potential as a trading port because of its strategic geo-economic location and natural sheltered harbour at the southern end of the Malay Peninsula, as well as its concomitant commercial and naval significance on the fabled spice route. Indeed, Singapore became one of the strongest military bases of the British Empire because the defence of the island acquired "a strategic and symbolic significance out of all proportion to its geopolitical position".<sup>2</sup> Professor Wong Lin Ken attributes the colony's early success to the "untrammelled private enterprise" of Asian and Western merchants and to its status as a free port "open to all races, without any religious, or

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<sup>1</sup> This popular colonialist version that Singapore's history began with Stamford Raffles has been contested by local historians and scholars. Dr Derek Heng of the Department of History, National University of Singapore, for instance, argues that the mainstream historical narrative needs to be changed as Singapore's history began long before Raffles. He contends that "previous scholars had to be content with only the study of colonial texts, as most of Singapore's pre-colonial remains were systematically destroyed by the British within the first decade after their arrival on the island in 1819". The National Heritage Board, Singapore History Museum and National Archives of Singapore also consistently assert that new archival materials and historical evidence show Singapore's history dating back to the fourteenth century. (*The Straits Times*, 21 November 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Wong Lin Ken, "The Strategic Significance of Singapore in Modern History" in *A History of Singapore*, eds. Ernest Chew and Edwin Lee (Oxford University Press, 1991), 31.



linguistic qualifications”.<sup>3</sup> Four chief factors have, according to him, promoted the phenomenal expansion and growth of Singapore during its colonial existence, viz its strategic location at the centre of the vital sea-lanes of South and East Asia; a free trade policy that imposed no taxes on trade or industry; a stable and predictable colonial administration; and a hardworking and enterprising migrant population. Significantly these factors have continued to remain the key assets and strengths of modern Singapore. Wong says that so pre-eminently was Singapore situated at the crossroads between the Indian and Pacific oceans in the expansion of trade between Asia and the West, that it prompted Rudyard Kipling to sing its praises in “The Song of Cities”:

East and West must seek my aid  
Ere the spent hull may dare the ports afar.  
The second doorway of the wide world’s trade  
Is mine to loose or bar.<sup>4</sup>

During colonial rule, Singapore developed as an entrepot port, linking its immediate hinterland and large parts of Southeast and East Asia to Western Europe. Activities directly and indirectly linked to this entrepot function dominated the Singapore economy for much of the colonial period. This economic structure therefore created the population dynamics of colonial society in Singapore. As the small indigenous population in Singapore at the time of its founding, comprising mainly Malays, could not supply the labour necessary for its entrepot activities, the British attracted migrants from other parts of Asia, chiefly China, the Indian sub-continent, and, to a lesser extent, the Malay Peninsula. From China came large numbers of commercially motivated entrepreneurs who became highly enterprising and successful traders. Most of them were absorbed in the entrepot economy and a range of other commercial activities. Indian migrants worked in the colonial administration as general workers, as labourers in the construction sector, and as traders. This combination of Chinese and Indians served to produce a business-inclined demographic base - a private sector that played an important part throughout the colonial period (and subsequently in nation building) in helping the British define the nature, extent, and type of land use. The key role played by the migrant

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<sup>3</sup> Wong Lin Ken, 41, 47.

<sup>4</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Song of Cities*, ed. Eileen Gillooly (New York: Sterling, 2000), 210.

communities indicates the tremendous amount of interaction that took place with the colonial administration, mostly through dialogue, negotiation and mutual interest but also through conflict and contestation.

With entrepot trade being the mainstay of the colonial economy, *godowns* and trading houses, wharves and quays proliferated on both sides of the Singapore River from the early years of Singapore's development to the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the town extended rapidly from the port area. Raffles' vision was that the new trading settlement would eventually become 'the emporium and pride of the East' and 'a place of considerable magnitude and importance'.<sup>6</sup> Realizing the significance of this settlement and its cultural diversity, he sought to order the physical landscape as growth had become haphazard. To this end Raffles established a Town Committee to draw up a land-use plan for urban development in which economic activities and allocation of land for the various peoples took centre-stage. This plan came to be known as the Raffles 1822 Town Plan (see Map 1) and formed the basis of development of the built environment of Singapore for over a century.

Well documented historical resources demonstrate the manner in which the Town Plan took shape.<sup>7</sup> According to these sources, Raffles divided the town into 'divisions' or '*kampungs*' for particular racial and occupational groups, particularly segregating the residential spaces of different racial groups away from the European area. The Europeans were allotted the area to the east of the government reserved area, while the Chinese congregated in and around the present Chinatown district which was divided among the various dialect groups, the Indians in the Serangoon district, and the Malays in Kampung Glam. Each division or *kampung* was placed under the immediate supervision of its own chiefs or *kapitans* (in Malay). These chiefs were then made responsible to the British Resident for policing their respective

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<sup>5</sup> *Godown* is a local term meaning warehouse. (A warehouse especially in South and Southeast Asia. Source: MSN Encarta)

<sup>6</sup> Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* (1902; reprint, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984), 67, 81.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Perry, Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore a Developmental City State* (John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 1997), 29; Brenda Yeoh, *Contesting Space: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore* (Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Ernest C T Chew & Edwin Lee, "The Foundation of a British Settlement" in *A History of Singapore*, eds. Ernest C T Chew & Edwin Lee (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991).

jurisdictions.<sup>8</sup> In a sense, such a practice can be broadly considered a precursor to the self-help policies later instituted by the nation state to enable the ethnic groups to regulate themselves for the State. The appropriation of territory by the different groups was reinforced by the official land-use zoning policy that recognised these enclaves. From the outset, then, the British adopted this policy of residentially segregating the different peoples and allocating different sections of the city to each of them<sup>9</sup> (see Chapter 3.2: Racial zoning and segregation). The spatial pattern laid down by the British reflected the different roles of each of the groups in the colonial economy and it was perpetuated throughout the entire period of British rule by a compartmentalisation of the economy and the labour market along ‘race’ lines.<sup>10</sup> It could be argued that the Raffles Town Plan segregating the physical landscape of Singapore into distinct racial divisions became more than anything else, a powerful symbol of planned social control, dominance and stratification of the various Asian groups - a stratification expressed by local historian Liew Kai Khuen in terms of status, class and ‘ethnicity’. Liew elaborates his argument by saying that the fear of contamination from and between the immigrant groups was primarily responsible for their segregation into various areas away from the European quarter and for the enforcement of public policies under the guise of “urban planning” and “sanitary control”.<sup>11</sup> Strict regulations relating to hygiene were enforced to avoid the “harmful pestilence radiating from the native areas”. It could be further argued that this spatial organization and segregation itself partially constituted these groups of people into ‘races’. The key word ‘race’, already denoting difference in this period, then came to be perpetuated throughout British rule and in independent Singapore.

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<sup>8</sup> Buckley, *An Anecdotal History*, 57.

<sup>9</sup> Significantly, the term segregation (as relating to the formal residential separation of races) seems to have been applied to the need for ‘town planning’ in the British colonies.

<sup>10</sup> Riaz Hassan, and Michael A. H. B. Walter, *An Island Community in Singapore: A Characterization of a Marginal Society* (Singapore: Chopmen Enterprises, 1977), 38; B W Hodder, “Racial Groupings in Singapore,” *Malayan Journal of Tropical Geography* 1 (1953): 25-36.

<sup>11</sup> Liew Kai Khuen, “Building beyond Perimeters: The Limits of Social Stratification & Urbanism on Housing in Colonial Singapore (1819-1941)” in “New Horizons: Nation-building and Singapore History,” *The Historical Journal: NUS Historical Society* (1997): 41.

### 1.1.2 Society

Although economic factors wielded an overriding influence over land use and spatial organization, British urban planning practices cannot be considered in isolation from social and cultural factors inherent in the unique nature of Singapore society. A study of urban anthropology in Singapore, both in colonial as well as in post-colonial times, has therefore to consider the process of urban living in this island – whether and to what extent different cultural groups adapt to the city or whether the city adapts to these groups. Irrespective of the direction of adaptation, this equation brings into focus interrelations between various interests, power and pressure groups. Consequently, concepts, images and memories of the city differ between different ethnic, cultural, occupational and status groups, because although social networks in Singapore are interdependent, people are largely separated from one another on the basis of their ethnic, religious, language, and class particularity. Hence we find different groups adapting the urban space for their own particular ends, thereby bringing into focus the tensions and negotiations of urban living. The important issues of ethnicity, language, class, religion, tradition, identity and ideology have, both in colonial and post-colonial times, always assumed great significance as Singaporeans have attempted to make sense of the large, complex and heterogeneous urban environment in which authoritarian colonial as well as post-colonial government policies and regulations have dictated the private and public space of Singaporeans at almost every level of urban life.

While hegemony, discipline and control governed the British administration's power structure in the colony, resistance and negotiation became the order of the day for the local communities. The British colonial masters, powerful migrant - mainly Chinese – groups as well as English-educated locals jointly negotiated their political space. As I explore in this and subsequent chapters, conflicting discourses and competing strategies were, according to Yeoh, employed by the Asian communities and the municipal authorities in various spheres of the built environment, namely, in sanitation, disease prevention and control, housing, place and street names, pedestrian 'five-foot ways' and sacred spaces such as burial grounds.<sup>12</sup> The British also controlled the definition and management of liquor licensing, property tax, law, order and public safety, market and traffic, water supply and drainage and suppression of

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<sup>12</sup> Yeoh, *Contesting Space*.

immoral activities. Such colonial management regulations and controls remain very much a characteristic of post-independent Singapore's built environment. In fact it can be argued that its rapid urban growth owes its origins to the regulatory tools of planning and control instituted by the British administration.

Nevertheless, the extent to which the non-European population drew upon their own discourses and cultural practices to establish strategies and resist hegemonic colonial laws cannot be underestimated according to historical sources. One of these was the tendency, particularly among the Chinese and to a lesser extent among Indians and Malays, to project and practice their own traditional 'Asian' values as opposed to western values - a discourse that resonates in Singapore to this day.<sup>13</sup> The Chinese, for example, practised their own social, cultural, religious and recreational activities without seeking recourse to the colonial government. With their institutional support of clan and dialect associations, trade guilds, temples and secret societies, they organised passive counter-strategies to resist control and dominance by the colonial administration. However, it was in the practices of everyday life that the various communities participated in the production and consumption of social spaces in colonial Singapore.

### **1.1.3 Urban Political Economy**

Urban public policy and planning in Singapore has traditionally, in colonial as in post-colonial times, been associated with state intervention in the urban political economy in order to rationalise and develop capitalist industrial development in terms of the improvement of living conditions. Castells calls this form of planning 'collective consumption', defining it as consumption whose "economic and social treatment, while remaining capitalist, takes place not through the market but through the state apparatus".<sup>14</sup> In colonial times, the British administration, recognising the importance of Singapore as an entrepot trading centre, marshalled its urban planning decisions towards developing the country's infrastructure and facilities. Capitalist industrial and economic development in the independent city-state has largely come

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<sup>13</sup> The rhetoric of 'Asian' values, a colonial construct, prescribes attitudes and ways of perceiving along with social practices which run counter to European attempts to impose colonialist notions of civilization and modernity. See 1.1.3, 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 for examples of Asian counter-strategies.

<sup>14</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Urban Question*, trans. A. Sheridan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 460.

about because of the political alliance between the local capitalist class and foreign capital which has been central to Singapore's political economy and global urbanism. While the colonial power supplied the global capital, the Asian immigrants provided the labour and this partnership, though effected through a system of labour exploitation, provided the catalyst for Singapore's economic development through the decades. Three distinct levels of economic development can be identified in Singapore's history as the country moved from entrepot trading post (1819-67), to regional city (1867-1965), to global city-state (post-1965). As an entrepot trading post with free port status, Singapore was controlled from India by the British East India Company and became, in 1827, part of the Straits Settlements that also included Malacca and Penang, two urban port towns on the west coast of Malaya. The pattern of entrepot trade involved European traders receiving goods on consignment that they sold on commission relying on Chinese traders as middlemen. This was the mutually beneficial relationship between British capital and Chinese traders that underpinned Singapore's economic growth during the colonial period. In addition to free port status, the other fundamental basis of its economic growth was free immigration, which allowed access to the cheap labour needed by British capital to extract raw materials like rubber and tin from the Malay hinterland later in the century.

In 1867 the island became a British Crown Colony, with the Colonial Office in London taking direct control of running Singapore. This situation continued (except for the period of Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945) until 1965 when it became completely independent subsequent to attaining self-government status in 1959. With direct rule, the British administration in Singapore introduced, through the Municipality, various forms of social regulation to influence the 'moral and social habits' of the people.<sup>15</sup> Such regulations included the suppression of piracy, the upgrade of the judicial system, and suppression of Chinese secret societies.<sup>16</sup> While the British exercised only such control over the local population as was necessary for the realisation of its commercial and strategic objectives, it introduced a professional British civil service and initiatives in such areas as the judicial system, health, education and welfare, all of which had many implications for social regulation of the

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Home, *Of Planting and Planning: The Making of British Colonial Cities* (London: Spon, 1997), 120.

<sup>16</sup> Yeoh, *Contesting Space*.

various communities. Interestingly this situation has been carried through and perpetuated by independent Singapore to an astonishingly high degree. As I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, social regulation remained a central state concern not only in the process of decolonisation in the aftermath of the Second World War, but more significantly in subsequent nation-building strategies in independent Singapore.

Commercial success in the early decades enabled the colonial town of Singapore to grow both in demographic, economic and spatial terms. However, according to Perry, Kong and Yeoh, social development for the growing population lagged far behind economic development.<sup>17</sup> Problems of poverty, overcrowding, sanitary control, sewage and rubbish disposal, malnutrition, lack of clean water, infectious diseases, high mortality rates, opium addiction, prostitution and general lack of social order and discipline were all compounded by the domestic practices and habits of the immigrant groups leading to what Warren calls, “a crisis of habitability”.<sup>18</sup> In particular, the acute housing shortage and the attendant problems of a poor sanitary environment resulted in squatter settlements springing up all over the central and city areas. Archival records show that the British administration, because of its laissez-faire policy towards housing, did not consider housing an important aspect of its urban planning practices. Official reports describe the severe shortage of housing for the masses and the overcrowded conditions of existing houses. A Housing Committee appointed in 1947 described housing conditions in Singapore as ‘a disgrace to a civilized community’.<sup>19</sup> Several years later, Kaye, who documented the living conditions of a typical street in Chinatown in 1954, described it as ‘among the most primitive in the urban areas of the world’.<sup>20</sup>

In the colonial mind, these problems were attributed, according to Yeoh, to the “basic nature of Asians as ‘incurably filthy’ and their intrinsic racial peculiarities.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore (1880-1940)* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), 194; Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, 41.

<sup>19</sup> *Report of the Housing Committee of Singapore*, 1948, 16 (Government of Singapore).

<sup>20</sup> Barrington Kaye, *Upper Nankin Street, Singapore: A Sociological Study of Chinese Households Living in a Densely Populated Area* (Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1960).

<sup>21</sup> Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, 100-101.

The Chinese residents – termed “the most insanitary of mortals” were singled out for their “filthy habits...a hereditary Chinese instinct”.<sup>22</sup> Such attitudes towards the immigrant communities emanated from a colonial discourse of power and superiority whereby Asian practices in managing health, disease and the environment were condemned by the colonial administration – a scenario Jyoti similarly paints in the colonial disparagement of Old Delhi (see Chapter 3.1). There was also the serious problem of law and order, and the colonial government realized the need for urban development that was essential for policing and surveillance functions. Consequently, the Asian communities were subject to the rigors of colonial notions of inspection, regulation, enforcement, disciplinary action and increased surveillance by government measures that included various issues like naming and signifying places, controlling urban traffic and segregating different types of land use. Yeoh says that several campaigns were mounted to prevent shopkeepers from obstructing pedestrian walkways. Legislation was also passed to close or control burial grounds that proliferated in the municipal area. Such methods were also effected so as to facilitate classification of information on racial categories.<sup>23</sup> Notwithstanding these measures, Singapore’s urban dilemmas continued to worsen, especially with the onset of the war and the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945).

The colonial administration had also left industrial, commercial, residential and community developments in the hands of the local communities with a minimum of state involvement. The administration encouraged communal initiatives that catered to the separate needs of the migrant groups and ensured the maintenance of the separate identities of all communities. Each group was therefore largely left to regulate itself, which the Chinese community did through guilds and secret societies that encouraged the Chinese-educated section of the community to be politically apathetic to colonial rule.<sup>24</sup> Similarly in the field of education, the colonial government adopted a largely hands-off attitude, paying attention only to English-

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<sup>22</sup> Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, 101.

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism. Volume One: Power, Property and the State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), 169. Giddens argues that the collection, synthesis and analysis of information about the members of a society can either be an aid to, or constitute a direct mode of, surveillance over their activities and attitudes.

<sup>24</sup> Yeoh, *Contesting Space*.



medium primary schools and ignoring vernacular education.<sup>25</sup> Separatism was practised in British education policy, allowing vernacular schools to exist in separate linguistic and communal compartments and creating a separate English-educated class as opposed to the vernacular-educated masses, hence widening the gap and feelings of separateness between and within the different ‘communities’ with racial, cultural and linguistic differences. For example, the colonial administration consciously and painstakingly promoted the development of an English-educated Chinese elite, thereby antagonizing the Chinese-educated elite, a difference that has had ethnic repercussions in the politics of postcolonial Singapore. State intervention in medical and health services was also limited, the official view being that the population was largely transitory and ‘people who drifted in and out did so at their own risk.’<sup>26</sup> Overall, the *laissez-faire* style adopted by the colonial government facilitated a free trading system but contributed little to the planned socio-economic development of the city. Says Edwin Lee, “The British understood the need to invest in infrastructure and Singapore was their show-piece, an artefact of colonial design and engineering skill” but in contrast “schools, hospitals, and homes for the people were either not enough or not up to standard”.<sup>27</sup>

As in all colonial societies, indigenous, immigrant and colonialist groups in Singapore were not only characterized by racial, cultural, social and religious pluralism but also by a social stratification system that constructed and privileged ‘race’ as the reference marker. The planning of separate quarters, the ranking and stereotyping of different communities on the basis of supposedly inherent racial attributes, and the general subordination of the local communities to white superiority in political and social spheres was the feature of life in urban Singapore. This was accentuated by the dualistic structure of the colonial urban landscape, symbolized by segregated European and indigenous quarters with their own distinct type of economic activities, land use patterns and architectural styles. On the eve of independence the colonial legacy was evident in the structured plural nature of society, comprising different factions, each with its own trades, traditions and

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<sup>25</sup> Saravanan Gopinathan, “Education” in *A History of Singapore*, eds. E.C.T.Chew and E.Lee (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), 269.

<sup>26</sup> Edwin Lee, “The Colonial Legacy” in *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, eds. K. S. Sandhu and P. Wheatley (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1989), 31.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

institutionalized practices. In the words of one commentator, “in spite of its wealth and strategic importance” Singapore was “in many respects a sociologically immature city where racial, tribal and economic divisions are still quite sharp”.<sup>28</sup>

## 1.2 Singapore – The Nation State

*One People One Nation One Singapore*

*Singapore – Quality Class*

*A City of Excellence*

*The City that Never Sleeps*

*Instant Asia*

*New Asia – Singapore*

*Small is Beautiful*

*Clean & Green*

*Garden City*

*Where the World comes to Feast*

*Live it up! Singapore*

*Singapore – So Easy to Enjoy*

*Shared Values*

*Intelligent Island*

Today slogans, devised by the State, dot the highways, building foyers and urban spaces of Singapore. In one way they epitomize the metamorphosis characterizing Singapore urbanization since Sir Stamford Raffles first set foot on Singapura, the Lion City, in 1819.

The building of contemporary Singapore has resulted from early British innovations in urban development and planning. Anthony King notes that communication systems, financial, banking, insurance and warehouse facilities all proliferated to incorporate the colonial city into the capitalist world system.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, the spatial organization of the city and the local society became, in his view, articulated to the demands of capital, a situation that is valid from colonial times

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<sup>28</sup> B W Hodder, “Racial groupings in Singapore,” *Malayan Journal of Tropical Geography*, 1 (1953): 25.

<sup>29</sup> Anthony King, “Colonialism, Urbanism and the Capitalist World Economy,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 13 (1989): 1-18.

to the present day in Singapore. The colony therefore was from its inception a planned and progressive city, with urban planning practices put in place by the British - this was the legacy the new nation state inherited when it obtained independence in 1965, a scenario that is in line with King's argument that colonial urban development has had a profound influence with urban planning for national development.

Colonialism and capitalism have both been the catalysts for the development of Singapore into a highly state-controlled and globalised free market economy in the years since the nation became fully independent. The unusual circumstances surrounding the sudden independence of Singapore – an isolated Chinese city in a Malay-dominant region; a small island without any natural resources; a declining trade economy; the need to provide jobs for the largely unskilled but rapidly growing population - enabled the new state to adapt the human resources, facilities and institutions that emanated from colonial rule to immediately institute vast economic development and industrialization programmes that have been instrumental in creating the post-colonial nation state. This transformation was effected by an ideology of 'survivalism' that enabled the nation state to set in motion a bewildering array of tightly-regulated and enforced rules and social policies supporting its various development plans aimed at stimulating economic growth, a disciplined and obedient workforce, and multiracial solidarity.<sup>30</sup> The state envisioned, in the words of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, that "every Singaporean citizen must learn how to be a good citizen; how to be fit; how to be honest, effective, and deserving of belonging to a community with the highest social and living standards in South-East Asia". He should be the "rugged" product of "a systematic programme for the inculcation of self-discipline".<sup>31</sup> A deliberate policy of redesigning and redefining Singapore's physical, urban and cultural landscapes by means of urban planning and renewal has been the predominant focus of nationalism and economic growth, to such an extent that the main government agency in Singapore responsible for controlling and renewing the built environment is called the Urban Renewal Authority. Since

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<sup>30</sup> Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore* (London and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 49; Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 109. The term "survivalism" is used by Chua Beng Huat to describe the ideology of the ruling PAP government from the 1960s to the 1980s.

<sup>31</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, cited in Philip Holden, "At Home in the Worlds: Community and Consumption in Singapore," Unpublished working paper for *Perpetuating Cities* Workshop held in National University of Singapore, (7-9 June 2001): 7.

independence the Master Plan continues to provide the blueprint for the overall land-use pattern in Singapore.<sup>32</sup> The Singapore urbanscape is a masterpiece in social engineering, as can be seen in various policies implemented by the state. Social engineering has been a vital component of the social, cultural and economic changes undertaken by the state since independence and will be explored in depth in Chapters 6-8 in the context of a discussion of ‘racial’ politics and identities in the city-state.

Singapore has also become a global financial, trading, industrial, and technological hub, so much so that it has earned the epithet of “economic miracle” and is sometimes referred to as ‘Singapore Inc.’. Dynamic leadership has, in the last four decades, integrated the nation into the global world economy with the result that Singapore is now considered one of the best-run economies in the world. Embracing globalisation to maximum advantage, the city-state has in the past decade opened its doors wide to foreign investment and talent, slashed corporate taxes, offered incentives to nurture strategic industries (such as biotech, pharmaceuticals and financial services) and cut free-trade deals with a host of other countries. Singapore’s spectacular growth can be seen by the fact that over the past three years, its economy has averaged 7.6 per cent growth – a staggering pace for an industrialized state – and created new jobs at a rate any government would envy.

Chief sponsor of “Singapore Inc.”, the post-colonial Government is generally seen as dominating all aspects of political, economic, cultural and social life. It has, for reasons of necessity and survival, striven to construct a national identity primarily on economic grounds because of the absence of any prevailing ideology at the time of its unceremonial exit from the Malaysian Federation in 1965.<sup>33</sup> The Government frequently reiterates that economic growth is required for, what it calls, “sustainable urban development”, a slogan that conveys different meanings to different people. Contained in this term is a raft of Government perceptions and policies that project economic growth as synonymous with national identity – these policies are explored in Chapters 6-8. For this purpose, the Government has declared capitalist values like

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<sup>32</sup> The Master Plan, a term coined and adopted in Singapore since 1958 refers to the plans laid out by the government to regulate land use, physical planning and development in the island. Proposals for physical development by both the public and private sectors have to be scrutinized in the light of the prevailing Master Plan.

<sup>33</sup> Singapore achieved internal self-government from the British in 1959, and merged with Malaysia as a component state in 1963, but because of serious differences between the political elites of both countries that led to racial riots between the Chinese and Malays in both countries, Singapore was ordered out of the Malaysian Federation.

materialism, enterprise and competition as integral to Singapore's national culture, while simultaneously creating an official 'cultural' ethos based on "Asian communitarian values". Government leaders defend a discourse that emphasizes order, discipline, pragmatism, elitism, collectivism, Confucian ethics and authoritarian ways as opposed to Western-style values supposedly based on individual rights. The content of this distinctive and "hybrid" Singaporean identity and the "proper" balance between cosmopolitan and traditional values are issues that continue to shape contemporary society in Singapore. As a means of integrating the fragmented fractions of society and forging a single identity out of a population riven by racial, religious, language and cultural lines, the PAP Government has also espoused the ideology of multiracialism 'without discrimination for any particular community'.<sup>34</sup>

### 1.3 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the planned spatial and built environment of Singapore from its colonial origins to the global city has been the outcome of historical, sociopolitical and economic forces, spatial practices and social control. Of particular significance has been the high impact of colonial urban planning practices, the role of capitalism, the psychological mobilization of society, and the political attempt at self-legitimation through rapid and spectacular economic development and social change, all of which have enabled the nation state to achieve control through its enormous power structure, both literally and symbolically.

The politics of space in Singapore has also an intensive ideological dimension, because its citizens invest places with meanings related to state-enforced rules and regulations that they have imbibed through their own social and cultural backgrounds. In subsequent chapters, I will interrogate how the contemporary ethnic quarter of Singapore now known as 'Little India' came into being, and how meanings vested in this ethnic district of Singapore are closely woven with the passage of history associated with the place. While historical continuity has made Little India a distinctive community place and space for Indians in Singapore, its significance must

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<sup>34</sup> Chan Heng Chee and Hans-Dieter Evers, "National Identity and Nation Building in Singapore" in *Studies in ASEAN Sociology: Urban Society and Social Change*, eds., P.Chen and H.D.Evers (Singapore: Chopmen Enterprises, 1978), 123. The concept and practice of 'multiracialism' is discussed in Chapter 5.

inevitably be related to the nation state's social, political, ideological and economic fabric in which identity and 'racial' politics play a significant part.

The early Indian migrants to Singapore grouped themselves in different areas, ultimately congregating in the Little India area around Serangoon Road, an area that has enormous significance for the Indian community and for the state as well. This significance will be explored in the next chapter in which I will examine the arrival and settlement of Indians in several parts of Singapore, and finally their concentration in Little India.

## CHAPTER 2

### INDIAN MIGRATION

#### 2.1 Indian migration to the British colonies, including Southeast Asia

Large-scale movement and settlement of people from the Indian sub-continent into various British colonies began with the expansion of Western colonialism and capitalism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With the political independence of former British colonies, most Indians have become domiciled in their respective countries. The descendants of these Indian indentured migrants today have taken their place in the socio-cultural and political milieu of their adopted nation states.

British colonial dominance of the Indian sub-continent facilitated the movement of Indians to Myanmar, Malaya (which then included Singapore), Fiji, Mauritius, West Indies, British Guyana, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa and a few other British trading posts spread throughout the British Empire. Indian immigration appears to have begun in 1833, when slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire and cheap and subservient labour was sought to work the plantations in the colonies.<sup>1</sup> With an impoverished India becoming the perfect source of cheap labour recruitment, the colonial administration and European planters in these colonies developed a system of quasi-slavery termed 'Indentured Labour Contract' to bring migrant labourers from the Indian sub-continent. There were also other forms of labour migration, but the most common form was the indentured system, used specifically for sugarcane cultivation. For about 80 years between 1833 and until the abolition of indentures in 1917, the plantation economies in various British colonies thrived by the hard labour of these Indian labourers or "coolies". The processes of recruitment and settlement into Malaya (including Singapore) can be divided into two historical phases, the first phase from about 1840 to 1910 when indentured labourers were imported from Madras in South India under a regressive and exploitative system, and the second phase from about 1910 to 1938, the period of the more progressive 'kangany' (meaning foreman in Tamil) system of immigration. Both

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<sup>1</sup> R B Krishnan, *Indians in Malaya: A Pageant of Greater India* (Singapore: The Malayan Publisher, 1936), 15.

were forms of assisted labour migration. There also existed so-called “free” or “independent” migrant labourers. In addition, there was the movement of professional and commercial people as well as clerks, technicians and people working in other service-related sectors of the economy.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the influx of these people into Malaya during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Hindu traders had already been arriving from the Indian Coromandel Coast from the second century AD onwards. Through cultural assimilation and intermarriage, the continued presence and influence of these Indian merchants had resulted in the Indianization of several city-states in Southeast Asia and a flourishing civilization. The ‘Malay Annals’ in *Sejarah Melayu* (Malayan history) and scholars on the subject of Indian origins in Malaya and Singapore have documented the conquest of Singapore (then called Temasek) and other parts of Malaya by the Tamil king Rajendra Chola (1012-1044).<sup>3</sup>

The indelible Indian legacy that was left behind in Malaya and Singapore is still evident today in the Malay language and literature, its customs, its arts and crafts, and perhaps most significantly in the Sanskrit name given to Singapura (or Lion City), now known as Singapore.<sup>4</sup> Professor K S Sandhu, quoting famed historian R O Windsdett, describes this legacy thus:

With little exaggeration, it has been said of Europe that it owes its theology, its literature, its science and its arts to Greece: with no greater exaggeration it may be said of the Malayan races that till the nineteenth century, they owed everything to India: religions, a political system, medieval astrology and medicine, literature, arts and crafts...<sup>5</sup>

The outstanding feature of the legacy of Indian influence brought about by early Indian traders and contract labourers has therefore been the historical evolution and growth of Singapore. Set against this background of history and tradition, Indian

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<sup>2</sup> Krishnan, *Indians in Malaya*. See also Chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement, 1768-1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 22; Sandhu, *Early Malaysia: Some Observations on the Nature of Indian Contacts with Pre-British Malaya* (Singapore: University Education Press, 1973), 54-58; Edwin A Brown, *Indiscreet Memories* (London: Kelly & Walsh Ltd., 1935); K A Nilakanta Sastri, *The Colas: With over 100 Illustrations* (Madras: University of Madras, 1975);

<sup>4</sup> Donald Moore, *The First 150 Years of Singapore* (London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1957), 35.

<sup>5</sup> Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*, 303.



labour migration to Malaya (and hence Singapore) in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be considered an extension of Indian influence accelerated by European imperialist expansion and British colonial rule. The migration of Indians into Singapore must therefore be situated in the larger political and economic contexts of Malayan colonial history.

## **2.2 Indian Migration to Singapore**

While there were trickles of Indian migrants into Singapore in the pre-colonial era, flows of Indian migration started after the founding of Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819 and the subsequent formation of the Straits Settlements (comprising Singapore, Penang, and Malacca) in 1827. Consequently the types of migrants entering the Malay Peninsula were sharply different in the case of Singapore. While the indenture and ‘kangany’ systems of labour migration operated in Singapore to a small extent, with agriculture and rubber estates becoming relatively insignificant, the types of Indian migrants into the British colony varied considerably when compared to the Malayan mainland and with migrant settlements in other British colonies. Sandhu describes the migrant thus:

A new genre of Indian migrant – Ramasamy, the labourer, Tulsi Ram, the convict, Bhai Singh, the policeman, Maniam, the technical assistant and Pillai, the clerk – arrived in the country... . They were the principal labourers and security guards and, together with the Tamils from Ceylon, the main administrative and technical assistants.<sup>6</sup>

The changing Indian migration patterns were a testimony to the fact that the British saw Singapore as an excellent trading hub and colonial settlement and therefore labour was badly needed to fill jobs as labourers and construction workers. This need tied in neatly with their economic policy to exploit both Singapore as well as India with its large population, unemployment, poverty, epidemics and slow economic growth. Hence, controlled immigration (labourers), convicts and voluntary immigration (traders and professionals) formed the bulk of the settlement and evolution of the Indian community in Singapore. The other great push factor that

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<sup>6</sup> Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*.

propelled the migrants, predominantly male, to leave India was that of caste.<sup>7</sup> Emigration for poor, unemployed, landless and lower-caste labourers thus not only provided economic survival but the hope of social emancipation in terms of removing them from the clutches and exploitation of the caste system. Crossing the seas was not taboo to lower-castes, unlike the upper-castes, hence the demographic preponderance of lower castes in comparison to the upper castes in Singapore. According to Arasaratnam, in the early nineteenth century a third of the emigrants belonged to the untouchable castes of *pariyan*, *chakliyan* and *pallan*. A smaller number of higher caste groups also chose to migrate like the *vellalan*, *koundan* and *vaniyan*.<sup>8</sup> Caste differences had repercussions along with related sub-ethnic, religious and linguistic differences in the evolution of the Indian community and its built environment in Singapore, particularly in the context of Singapore's Little India. For example, once in Singapore:

Labourers of the untouchable castes ... were housed in separate lines ... from those of the "clean castes". Provision for drinking water was also separate. The untouchables had separate shrines ... not allowed into the temples of the upper caste.<sup>9</sup>

Since the early Indians were very much affiliated with the native country, caste taboos were strictly followed by individuals who intended to return to India to resume their place in the village communal system and caste structure.

I will, in the remainder of this chapter, explore how these different players helped to shape the urban landscapes of the Indian quarters in particular, and of Singapore as a whole, during the colonial period. This was a process that involved a measure of resistance and negotiation on the part of the Indian community to the hegemonic urban planning decisions of the colonial administration, although historical sources agree that the Indian migrants were generally obedient and law-abiding.

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<sup>7</sup> A Mani, "Changing Caste-Structure amongst Singapore Indians", University of Singapore (1977); S Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970); Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*.

<sup>8</sup> Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Arasaratnam, 65.

The Indians migrated to Singapore in waves. The first migrants were sepoys (soldiers) in the employ of the East India Company and accompanied Raffles on his first visit in January 1819. They remained to guard British interests on the island when the Lieutenant-Governor sailed for the British settlement of Penang on the Malaysian mainland. During the early years, then, the majority of Singapore's Indian population comprised military men and camp followers who belonged to the lower castes.<sup>10</sup> However, some civilians soon joined them. When, at the end of May 1819, Raffles arrived for a second visit to Singapore, he brought along with him a number of Indian immigrants from Penang that had already been colonized since 1786. Among them was an enterprising merchant, Naraina Pillai, who quickly set about building a brick-kiln to supply bricks to the builders and establishing religious and educational organizations for the benefit of the Hindus. Says Pearson of Pillai: "it was a beginning from which great things have come".<sup>11</sup> Within five years of Pillai's arrival in Singapore, there were 756 Indians living on the island, accounting for about 7% of its then population of 10,683, which also comprised 4,580 Malays, 3,317 Chinese, 1,925 Bugis, 74 Europeans, 16 Armenians and 15 Arabs.<sup>12</sup> Virtually to this day the Indian population in Singapore remains at about 7% by virtue of the new nation state's planned policies of multiracialism and demographical balance. The following table and graph show the growth of the Indian population in Singapore over the years.

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<sup>10</sup> C M Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819-1988* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15.

<sup>11</sup> H F Pearson, *Stories of Early Singapore* (Singapore: University of London Press, 1955), 108.

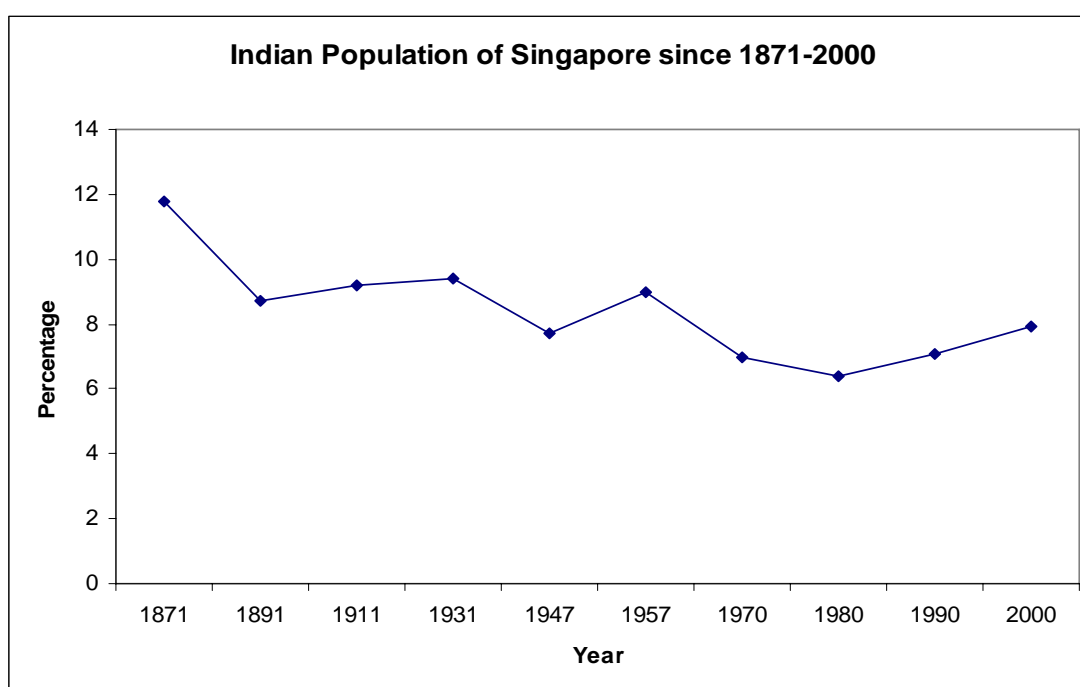
<sup>12</sup> J F A McNair & W D Bayliss, *Prisoners Their Own Warders* (London, Westminster: A. Constable, 1899), 38.

Table 1

## The Indian Population of Singapore, 1819-2000

Year	Number of Indians in Singapore (000)	Number of Indians as a percentage of Total Population of Singapore (%)
1819	n.a.	n.a.
1871	11.5	11.8
1891	16.0	8.7
1911	28.4	9.2
1931	50.9	9.4
1947	69.0	7.7
1957	124.0	9.0
1970	145.2	7.0
1980	154.6	6.4
1990	194.0	7.1
2000	257.8	7.9

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore



A steady stream of Indians continued to arrive in Singapore over the years, according to Jackson.<sup>13</sup>

While the majority of these early Indians were mainly from South India, subsequently North Indians like the Sikhs, Bengalis and Pathans came to Singapore. These Indian migrants regarded Singapore as an economic treasure trove, and their purpose was to acquire as much wealth as possible to better their financial position back in India. They saw themselves as temporary residents who had every intention of returning back home to India.<sup>14</sup> Thus, very few brought their families. Historical records show that most of these Indian migrants were single men.<sup>15</sup> Most of these men lived in sleeping quarters above the shops, cattle sheds and stables provided by the employers who also provided daily meals. Some of them were employed in the plantation sector, initially under the indentured system and later the 'kangany' system, but the majority worked on public projects, transport, harbour and other service sectors of the economy, like doormen, watchmen, domestic servants, gardeners, cattle-herders and laundrymen (hence the area near Orchard Road is still known as Dhoby Ghaut).<sup>16</sup>

Another important factor that contributed to the increased presence of Indians in Singapore was the British preference for the cheap and docile Indian labourers compared to the Chinese who were engaged in secret society activities and demanded higher wages.<sup>17</sup> The Indians, as British subjects unlike the Chinese, were perceived as better accustomed to British authority.<sup>18</sup> The British also felt threatened by the

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<sup>13</sup> R N Jackson, *Immigrant Labour and the Development of Malaya, 1786-1920* (Kuala Lumpur, Government Press, 1961), 57.

<sup>14</sup> Mani, "Changing Caste-Structure amongst Singapore Indians"; S Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*; Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*; Turnbull, *A History of Singapore*; Charles Wilkes, *The Singapore Chapter of the Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1845; reprint: Antiques of the Orient Pte. Ltd., 1984).

<sup>15</sup> Jackson, *Immigrant Labour and the Development of Malaya*, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Turnbull, *A History of Singapore*. 99.

<sup>17</sup> Ironically and interestingly it was the Indians that spearheaded the trade union movement in independent Singapore. Many Indians also took to the legal profession and became vocal in their stance on politics, nationalism, and other issues of the day.

<sup>18</sup> Saw Swee Hock, "Population Trends in Singapore, 1819-1867," *Journal of South East Asian History* X, 1, 1971: 47.

increasing numbers of Chinese and their enterprising spirit.<sup>19</sup> In 1887, the Straits Settlements Governor, Sir Frederick Weld, wrote to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London, saying:

I am also anxious for political reasons that the great preponderance of the Chinese over any other race in these Settlements... should be counter-balanced as much as possible by the influx of Indian and other nationalities.<sup>20</sup>

The Indians of pre-war Singapore can be divided into three main occupational groups. The labouring class was the main group, while the commercial class comprised divergent groups of Indians, namely, Bengalis, Gujaratis, Sindhis, Sikhs, Parsies and Tamils, and included proprietors, managers of wholesale and retail businesses, salesmen, shop assistants, mercantile accountants, street vendors and peddlers. The third group engaged in trading and in a variety of white-collar jobs such as clerks, interpreters, overseers, policemen, watchmen, moneylenders and professionals like teachers, doctors and lawyers. They comprised Tamils (the majority), Malayalees, Telugus, Gujaratis, Sikhs, Punjabis, Ceylonese and others.<sup>21</sup> Raffles' liberal economic policies had resulted in the encouragement of the immigration of not only traders, "the lenial successors of the traders and sea captains of historical times", but also those in the supporting services, thereby creating vast employment opportunities.<sup>22</sup> However, Tamil labourers and the commercial class of persons dominated the occupational scene in pre-war Singapore, while Indian traders were (and still remain) more diverse in their ethnicities.<sup>23</sup>

With Indian community numbers increasing in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century, more of them stayed and fewer returned to India. The result was a semi-permanent ethnic minority, but no effort was made by the British administration to integrate them into local life,

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<sup>19</sup> Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*.

<sup>20</sup> Despatch # 297, 24 September 1887, cited in Saw Swee Hock and Cheng Siok-Hwa, "Migration Policies in Malaya and Singapore," *Review of Southeast Asian Studies* 1, 3 (Sept. 1971): 45-61. Yet the Indian population did not increase significantly over the years and the Chinese have continued to maintain their demographic dominance over the other communities ever since.

<sup>21</sup> Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*. 193.

<sup>22</sup> Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*.

<sup>23</sup> 1931 Census of British Malaya, London, 1932, 37.

according to Mani.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, the Indians looked on Singapore as a temporary residence for livelihood and maintained close ties with their homeland. They could not maintain traditional Indian family values in Singapore, most of them being males. Further, caste, class, and religious differences precluded their fusion into the general community in Singapore. Such differences were aggravated by cultural and linguistic differences between the Indians themselves, because the labourers and working classes originated from South India, while merchants came from the north. All these differences created separate cultural traditions, these separate traditions preventing cohesion between the various groups of Indians, not only then but also now in the new nation state.

The other group of Indians to come here were Indian convict labourers, the result of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, by which treaty the British surrendered Bencoolen, their outpost in Sumatra (Indonesia), to the Dutch in exchange for Malacca on the Malaysian mainland. Since Bencoolen had been a penal colony for convicts transported from the Indian subcontinent, often for life, the British had now to find a place for them.<sup>25</sup> For the next half century, Singapore remained an important penal settlement with about 1,200 resident Indian convicts in 1832, rising to 2,275 in 1860 (17.5% of Singapore's Indian population in this census year).<sup>26</sup> Overwhelmingly male, the convicts came from all over India and Ceylon and belonged to castes ranging from the Brahmins to the 'untouchables', and comprising Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists, a diversity that is reflective of Singapore's Indian population mix to this very day.<sup>27</sup> At that time, this heterogeneity was viewed as an advantage by the British authorities; McNair, for example, writes that "this admixture of caste and tribes was a very valuable corrective against possible insurrection".<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> A Mani, "Indians in Singapore Society" in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, eds. K S Sandhu and A Mani (Singapore: The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies: Times Academic Press, 1993), 791.

<sup>25</sup> K S Sandhu, "Tamil and Other Indian Convicts in the Straits Settlements A.D. 1790-1873," *Proceedings of the First International Conference of Tamil Studies*, Kuala Lumpur (1966): 197-8.

<sup>26</sup> Sandhu, "Tamil and Other Indian Convicts", 774; Saw Swee Hock, *Population Trends*, 57; C B Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore 1819-1867*, (1902; reprint, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984), 108.

<sup>27</sup> Sandhu, "Tamil and Other Indian Convicts", 200.

<sup>28</sup> McNair & Bayliss, *Prisoners Their Own Warders*. 123.

The overriding consequence of the convict presence for Singapore's built environment was the deployment of the convicts for vital colonial infrastructural development, mainly reclamation, roading and public building projects. With the civilian people concerned largely with trade (overwhelmingly Chinese, some Indians), agriculture (a Chinese monopoly) and fishing (mostly Malays), cheap labour was in extremely short supply in the early years of Singapore's growth. The colonial administration therefore found it expedient to provide the convicts training and skills for various construction trades and utilize them for infrastructural projects which now showcase Singapore's colonial past and heritage to present day generation of Singaporeans living in the new nation state.<sup>29</sup> Some of Singapore's most treasured public buildings and projects that the convicts were responsible for are Raffles Place (previously called Commercial Square and located in the heart of the commercial and administrative centre of the city), the Collyer Quay reclamation, numerous arterial roads from the city centre, railways, waterways, bridges, hospitals, prison buildings, public housing, courthouse buildings, lighthouses, temples, churches including Singapore's first church (St Andrew's Cathedral), and probably what was to be their last great contribution to Singapore's heritage, Government House.<sup>30</sup> This outstanding piece of colonial architecture (now called Istana – meaning palace in Malay) has housed Singapore's British Governors, Governor-General, and Presidents and Prime Ministers of the new nation state ever since. Also among the prominent examples of colonial architecture built with Indian convict labour are the old Parliament House, City Hall, Singapore Cricket Club, Fullerton Building, Supreme Court, Victoria Theatre and Victoria Memorial Hall, and Dalhousie Memorial. All these buildings are located in the heart of the colonial town centre.

Quarrying and brick making for the numerous projects was also the responsibility of the convicts. Sandhu elaborates:

The whole of the existing roads throughout the island ... every bridge in both town and country, all the existing canals, sea walls, jetties, piers ... have been constructed by convict labour ... Singapore is indebted for [their] works...<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Sandhu, "Tamil and Other Indian Convicts"; McNair & Bayliss, *Prisoners Their Own Warders*.

<sup>30</sup> McNair & Bayliss, *Prisoners Their Own Warders*.

<sup>31</sup> Sandhu, "Tamil and Other Indian Convicts", 200.



Their contribution to the built landscape of Singapore is described by various writers as having left an indelible mark on the development of Singapore's infrastructure from colonial times to the nation state.<sup>32</sup> This infrastructure continues to project Singapore's rich colonial heritage and the colourful multicultural diversity of its peoples. Netto aptly sums up their contribution: "the history of Indian convicts was the history of the Public Works Department of Singapore".<sup>33</sup> Their usefulness and versatility even extended to "any occasion when the presence of a body of men under discipline was required", McNair & Bayliss tell us. The convicts were therefore used to the maximum for the colony's economic and political advantage. Upon their release, many preferred not to return to India but to marry Indian (some ex-convicts themselves) or Malay women and so to merge into the small, but growing, local Indian community. Sandhu records the fact that in 1838 only 60% returned to India and by the 1860s only very few returned.<sup>34</sup> Community numbers were bolstered when many convicts were granted unconditional pardon on the transfer of administrative responsibility for the Straits Settlements from the Government of India to the Colonial Office in London in 1867.<sup>35</sup> Historical records show that many of them decided to remain in Singapore as cattle-keepers, bullock-cart pullers, carriage pullers, milk vendors, shopkeepers, road contractors, barbers, money lenders and other small traders.<sup>36</sup>

### **2.3 Gathering Grounds of Early Indian Migrants in Singapore**

Although the Indian migrants were a minority, they were spread out over different parts of the town. While Kampong Glam and Kampong China ultimately came to be identified with the respective Malay and Chinese ethnic groups, Kampong Chulia did not materialize as the only Indian ethnic enclave because of the racial zoning and segregation practices of the colonial administration as well as preference among Indian migrants to congregate within their own groups. Though there were six main concentrations where they tended to congregate, none of these areas is today so

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<sup>32</sup> Mani, "Indians in Singapore Society"; Sandhu, "Tamil and Other Indian Convicts".

<sup>33</sup> George Netto, *Indians in Malaya: Historical Facts and Figures* (Singapore, 1961), 16.

<sup>34</sup> Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*.

<sup>35</sup> McNair & Bayliss, *Prisoners Their Own Warders*.

<sup>36</sup> Netto, *Indians in Malaya*, 21; McNair & Bayliss, *Prisoners Their Own Warders*. 183.

completely identified with Singapore's Indian community as is that along Serangoon Road, the area that is now affectionately called "Little India." Little India is the heart and lifeline of Singapore's Indians and was the final area of traditional Indian concentration. Interestingly, however, this area was never designated as an ethnic enclave by the colonial administration, unlike Kampong China and Kampong Glam.

According to Siddique and Purushotam, the major influence in the early construction and settlement of Serangoon Road was cattle trading and related economic activities like milk, meat, production of sesame oil and wheat grinding.<sup>37</sup> These activities provided ample opportunities and therefore lured the early Indian migrants to the place thereby giving rise to the birth of an Indian enclave from the mid-nineteenth century. Roads named after such activities like Buffalo Road, Kerbau Road and Lembu Road (*kerbau* and *lembu* meaning buffalo and cow respectively in Malay) are still at the heart of Serangoon Road. Other economic activities introduced in Serangoon Road that helped to stimulate the cattle and related businesses there were of an agricultural nature. Farming activities including vegetable growing, planting of gambier, sugarcane and coconut, and rich grass for the cattle, were facilitated by the presence of canals like the Rochor and Kallang Rivers and the low-lying swampy nature of the land.

There were also other factors that provided the impetus for Indians to congregate in this area. The Public Works Department's labour lines sited there housed numerous Indian Tamils.<sup>38</sup> In addition, as Siddique and Purushotam have noted, the establishment of a convict jail on Bras Basah Road near the Dhoby Ghaut junction led to prison employees settling in the vicinity and promoting activities like laundrying (hence the name Dhoby Ghaut), food supply and dairying among the Indian immigrants.<sup>39</sup> Lack of space within the other areas of Indian groupings and particularly the Market Street/Chulia Street commercial centre and the predominantly North Indian enclave of the High Street area also led to South Indian commercial settlers establishing a ribbon development along Serangoon Road from the 1880s. All

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<sup>37</sup> Sharon Siddique and Nirmala Purushotam, *Singapore's Little India: Past, Present and Future* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982).

<sup>38</sup> B W Hodder, "Racial Groupings in Singapore," *Malayan Journal of Tropical Geography* 1 (1953): 33; Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*, 197.

<sup>39</sup> Siddique and Purushotam, *Singapore's Little India*.

these factors led to a loss of predominance of the Indian presence in those areas. Serangoon Road was also one of the key arterial roads along which the settlement fanned out from the centre of the city during the nineteenth century. It is still one of many main arterial roads that slice through Singapore, but when it was first built it stood as the only road that cut across the island. It already appeared on an 1822 map as a dotted line labeled “proposed Road across the island”. In a map prepared in 1828 by Lt Jackson, Serangoon Road is shown as “a road leading across the island”, signifying its importance in transportation in those days and thereby attracting and encouraging Tamil labourers, shopkeepers and traders to settle in this area.<sup>40</sup> Lime was also found here, giving rise to a brick-manufacturing industry. The Indians who worked in the numerous brick kilns that used to line Serangoon Road called the area “Village of Lime” or *Sunnambu Kambam* in Tamil. Over time, a thriving Indian community developed which engaged in an array of different occupations, including gold-trading, astrology, tattoo artistry, tailoring and money-lending. Tamil shopkeepers and traders are still the main occupiers of Serangoon Road. Places of worship, like the Sri Veeramakaliamman and Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temples, and the Angullia and Abdul Gafoor Mosques, were built. With the passage of time, Serangoon Road became Singapore’s traditional Indian quarter, and it remains so today, commonly known as Little India.

While the cattle and related economic activities increased the flow of immigrants into the area, this meant that more space was needed for the population as well as for roads, buildings, shophouses, temples and other construction. These developments gradually reduced the prominent role of the cattle trade and led to commercial and retail activities catering to the needs of the growing population in the area. The final blow to the cattle trading activity came in 1936 with the passing of the Municipal Ordinance that completely prohibited cattle trading in Serangoon Road.<sup>41</sup> Consequently by the 1930s, the character of the place began to undergo a dynamic transformation from an area of cattle rearing and trading into a burgeoning residential-commercial district that persists to the present day. With the congregation of Indians along Serangoon Road from the middle of the nineteenth century, the area developed over time into an “Indian” space, providing comforts and an environment similar to

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<sup>40</sup> Siddique and Purushotam, *Singapore’s Little India*.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

native India. The growing population of Indians in the area enhanced their social, economic and religious organizations there, further attracting more Indians to the place. The heavy concentration of Indians in the place also provided a sense of emotional and physical security to the new immigrants and a style of living similar to that of India. This can be seen, for example, in the temples with ornate carvings that help to create a total atmosphere of little pockets of different parts of India. The Indian flavour of the place continues to be maintained and strengthened for the social, economic, physical, emotional, cultural and religious needs of the Indians in Singapore. Notwithstanding urban dilemmas like poor and insanitary housing conditions caused by the neglect of the British administration, by the late nineteenth century most new migrant Indians were choosing to settle in this area.

During the first half of the twentieth century, a new wave of commercial Indian migrants that were different from the early waves of Indian migrants in terms of demographic and occupational structure began to settle in the area. The rapid commercial evolution of Singapore during this period brought many North Indian businessmen from established business communities such as the Parsees, Sindhis, Marwaris and Gujaratis, as well as South Indian retail traders and Chettiar money lenders. After 1920, migration of Indians strengthened when the British developed military bases in various outlying parts of Singapore for strategic purposes. Civilian workers were needed for the construction and maintenance of such bases and this led to an inflow of migrants from South India. Commercial traders and activities like the *doothwallas* (milk vendors), goldsmiths, *paanwallas* (seller of betel nut leaves wrapped around various condiments), curd sellers, *mamak* (South Indian Muslims) stalls, dhobis, barbers, flower garlanders, fortune tellers, tailors, money changers and money lenders, frame makers, Tamil record shops, sari shops, luggage shops, ayurvedic medical shops, textile shops, provision shops, eating establishments and other trading enterprises, some even flowing into the five-foot ways, have contributed to the growing commercial character and Indian ambience of the place.<sup>42</sup> Unlike the single men who dominated the early migration scene, these traders brought their families with them from the 1950s and their stability contributed to the fact that most of these trades are still prevalent in Little India today.<sup>43</sup> However the state's

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<sup>42</sup> Siddique and Purushotam, *Singapore's Little India*.

hegemonic heritage conservation policy in the last two decades has affected traditional Indian activities as I will demonstrate in Chapter 8.3. Since the mid-1980s, a new wave of Indian professionals (particularly software engineers, analysts and chartered accountants), construction labourers as well as domestic maids have been coming into Singapore for their livelihood and, in the case of professionals, taking up residency in Singapore. These groups also patronize Little India for their varied needs.

## **2.4 The Ethnic Signification of Little India**

Despite the predominance of Indians living in the area, Little India was nevertheless a multicultural space. One reason for this was the presence of two very important inland waterways – Rochor River and Kallang River – straddling Serangoon Road. Hence the importance of gambier, pepper and coconut plantations, sugar, nutmeg and *sireh* (Malay for betel leaves) and other vegetable gardens which thrived on both sides of Serangoon Road and along Balestier and Lavender Streets at the northern end of the Little India area. These agricultural activities were undertaken mainly by the Chinese though such activities were short-lived.<sup>44</sup> Their activities were augmented by the construction of Rochor Canal. Not surprisingly, the Chinese built their homes in such areas as Syed Alwi Road, Balestier Road and Lavender Street. Another important factor was the crucial role played by the Europeans in shaping the landscapes along Serangoon Road as they created leisure spaces in the midst of vernacular economic scenes. The racecourse, a symbol of radically unequal and racially based power relations, was built to cater to the leisure needs of wealthy Europeans who dabbled in activities like horse riding and horse racing. A main road was constructed for this purpose and named “Race Course Road”, a street name that still exists today. The built environment of the Little India area also became increasingly significant with the provision of various amenities by the colonial administration. These took the form of colonial buildings and landmarks serving the needs of the various communities. All these factors led not only to the development of various activities and the active involvement of the various communities in the

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<sup>43</sup> Ernest C T Chew & Edwin Lee, “The Foundation of a British Settlement”, in *A History of Singapore*, eds. Ernest C T Chew and Edwin Lee (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>44</sup> Siddique and Purushotam, *Singapore’s Little India*.

development but also contributed to the cultural richness of Serangoon Road and the vicinity (see Plate 6).

Little India was therefore not only home for the Indians but also housed Europeans, Eurasians, Chinese and Malays, reflecting the multi-ethnic character of Singapore. As claimed by Siddique and Purushotam:

...although one could argue that the Indian community provided definitive identity for the area, they certainly never held exclusive territorial claims to it, and in fact, settlement and working patterns seem to reflect particularly well the ethnic/community diversity which is so characteristic of Singapore's population.<sup>45</sup>

According to Siddique and Purushotam, such ethnic diversity in the Little India area was also reflected in the building plans submitted by the various communities. Chinese, European, Eurasian and Indian communities all wanted to put up residential and commercial structures in the area.<sup>46</sup> While the Indians built dwelling houses and shophouses facing Serangoon Road, the Europeans, Eurasians and rich Chinese businessmen built bungalows at the corner of Serangoon Road and Syed Alwi Road. Shophouses with characteristic Chinese architectural styles were also built by the Chinese in the area. In particular, there was and still is Chinese dominance in Perak Road, Mayo Street, Madras Road and along the Jalan Besar perimeter of Little India, where there are mainly Chinese shops dealing with Chinese hardware, electrical goods and Chinese food outlets. The segment of the Serangoon Road area between Syed Alwi Road and Lavender Street continues to be dominated by the Chinese rather than the Indians.

Malays and Indian-Muslims lived in the adjoining area of Kampong Kapor, which is bounded by Sungei Road, Syed Alwi Road, Serangoon Road and Jalan Besar. The Malay residents there were mainly Boyanese (from the coast of Java in Indonesia) and were employed as syces, horse-trainers, carriage-drivers and bullock-cart drivers. The proliferation of such jobs in the area could be explained by their close proximity to the Race Course.

The influence of the Chinese, Malay and other communities in the area is also evident in the many vernacular street names in that area, providing further evidence of

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<sup>45</sup> Siddique and Purushotam, *Singapore's Little India*, 35.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

the ethnic heterogeneity of the place. For instance, the word “Serangoon” may be derived from the Malay word *ranggong*, which was a small marsh bird that used to inhabit the muddy banks of the old Serangoon River. The Malay villagers called it Rangong; the Europeans knew it as the Marabou Stork. The spelling “Saranggong” (*sa*, meaning one in Malay) appears on some of the earliest maps of British Singapore. From this feathered creature, the river and, later, Serangoon Road, got their names. Another Malay interpretation is that the word Serangoon has its roots in the Malay phrase *di-serang dengan gong*, literally meaning the use of gongs to frighten off the wild animals then living in the area.<sup>47</sup> Most Indians believe that Serangoon Road is derived from the name Sri Rengam, a temple town in South India where the early Indian emigrants to Singapore came from.<sup>48</sup> There is also a claim that Serangoon Road originated from Rangoon, the old capital city of Myanmar. Streets in Little India and in the vicinity therefore came to be known by vernacular Chinese, Malay and Indian names that stemmed from these communities living side by side and using the same space. The locals labeled streets and places on the basis of the environmental character of the surroundings and their daily experiences, thereby resisting and negotiating official street names imposed hegemonically by the colonial administration. The various meanings that different communities invested indicated the different systems of signifying the landscape. The rich variety of street names to be found in the area also brings to mind the prominent individuals who spent their lives building the urban landscape of Singapore. Streets in Little India are of several types: those associated with the cattle trade and cottage industries, streets named after British colonial officials and prominent European families, streets named after colonial bungalow dwellers and entrepreneurs, and finally streets named after prominent Indian personalities. Little India’s streets are as shown in Map 2.

## 2.5 Conclusion

The story of Indian migration has therefore been one of physical movement, through history, of Indians to various British colonies, including Singapore. People of different caste, class, religious and linguistic backgrounds

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<sup>47</sup> Siddique and Purushotam, *Singapore’s Little India*.

<sup>48</sup> V Gopalakrishnan, *Singapore’s Changing Landscapes: Geylang, Chinatown, Serangoon: Based on SBC TV Documentaries*, eds. V. Gopalakrishnan and Ananda Perera (Singapore: FEP International, 1983), 67.

migrated to Singapore. Occupationally and in numerical order of ascendance, these were Indian labourers, professionals and merchants. Regardless of the circumstances under which they arrived, and in spite of their different regional origins from their motherland, they were able to find their respective niches in the Singapore economy and contribute significantly to the colony's development. Through the colonial processes of hegemony, racial zoning and segregation in its various manifestations they went about constructing their lives.

Throughout the nineteenth century and particularly towards the latter part of the century, and all through the twentieth century, the Serangoon Road area became increasingly the most important concentration of Indian migrants, though this did not occur in isolation from other communities. The social worlds of Indians, due to their location in an obviously multicultural context and their numerical minority, were not just constituted by contact and interaction with members of their own ethnic community. Since their earliest days in Singapore, their daily existence has also been constructed existentially through intra-ethnic relations. Mixing with other communities, namely the Chinese, Malay, Eurasian and European communities, the Indians have formed an important minority 'community', although this term is problematic in the context of the multiracial politics of Singapore. Who and what is an 'Indian' in Singapore? The Indian community is caught in a dilemma, struggling to find its way between the national objectives of ethnic and national identities in Singapore. How does the community grapple with these conflicting identities in the conduct of its everyday strategies of existence and coexistence while responding to the various race-based policies in force? How do these policies impact them? What sort of tensions do they negotiate in the ideology of official CMIO multiracialism? To what extent will Little India continue to be relevant, not only to the Indian community in Singapore but also to the flows and meanings inherent in a global city like Singapore? These issues will be explored in subsequent chapters.



## CHAPTER 3

### THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE COLONIAL NARRATIVE IN SINGAPORE – AN IDEOLOGY OF RACIAL ZONING AND SEGREGATION

In this chapter, I explore the relationship between early settlement patterns and the construction of the colonial narrative in Singapore, teasing out the ways in which racial zoning and segregation retold a specific colonial narrative. The construction of the narrative forms the ideology underlying colonial urbanism and is integral to the colonial project. The colonial project, according to Bernard Cohn, depends largely on the creation and production of colonial knowledge that in turn manifests itself in the construction of unequal and racially based power relations with the colonized.<sup>1</sup> The colonial narrative is also the subject of how ‘space’ in colonial urban Singapore led to different representations of the landscape by the colonial administration and the various communities.

#### 3.1 The Construction of the Colonial Narrative in Singapore

“I think that the capacity for governing is a characteristic of our race, and it is wonderful to see in a country like the Straits, a handful of Englishmen and Europeans, a large and rich Chinese community, tens of thousands of Chinese of the lower coolie class, Arab and Parsee merchants, Malays of all ranks, and a sprinkling of all nationalities, living together in wonderful peace and contentment. It always seems to me that we – an eccentric race – were created to govern and look after them, as a groom looks after a horse, whilst they were created to get rich and enjoy the good things of the earth.”

Frederick A Weld<sup>2</sup>

So declared Frederick Weld, Governor of the Straits Settlements, in a speech, delivered on 10 June 1884, clearly enunciating the innate right of the British to govern and hence manage the colonial power structure in Singapore. Binary oppositions of

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard S Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Frederick A. Weld, “The Straits Settlements and British Malaya [speech delivered on 10 June 1884]”, in *Honourable Intentions: Talks on the British Empire in South-East Asia delivered at the Royal Colonial Institute 1874-1928*, ed. Paul H. Kratoska (Singapore: Oxford University Press), 46-7.

Europeans/others, and dominance/dependence organize the speech, simultaneously establishing and justifying colonial power, dominance and control. This discourse of the colonial power constructs natives as the “other” in order to facilitate subordination, says AlSayyad.<sup>3</sup> Such constructions have been embedded in colonialist notions of “the Orient” as justifications for empire building. Edward Said’s famous treatise also posits that the ‘Orient’ was a product of late-eighteenth century European colonialism and points to the plans and projects of colonial powers in justifying and maintaining cultural domination and control over indigenous populations.<sup>4</sup>

Said’s argument has resonated with many writers, particularly in colonised countries. Preeti Chopra interprets the colonial city as the site where the colonial power has the potential to “fundamentally transform the built environment to make it serve its interests - be they economic or ideological”.<sup>5</sup> Shirine Hamadeh contends that the notion of the ‘traditional city’ was an ideological construct born out of French colonial discourse and used to legitimise French domination in North African colonies.<sup>6</sup> This image, according to her, serves to “promote the idea of an exotic, static and disorderly people in contrast to advanced and normalised European society”, similar to Indian writer Hosagrahar Jyoti who, writing in the same vein as Said, claims that India was constructed as a disorderly ‘other’ in need of British authority, protection and redemption.<sup>7</sup> Jyoti has interpreted British New Delhi as a ‘theatre of colonial discourse’, the dramaturgical metaphor being used to examine the cultural domination and subordination of indigenous peoples through urban planning

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<sup>3</sup> Nezar AlSayyad, “Urbanism and the Dominance Equation: Reflections on Colonialism and National Identity” in *Forms of Dominance: On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Edward W Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Preeti Chopra, “Pondicherry: A French Enclave in India” in *Forms of Dominance: On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992), 107-37.

<sup>6</sup> Shirine Hamadeh, “Creating the Traditional City: A French Project” in *Forms of Dominance: On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992), 41-59.

<sup>7</sup> Hosagrahar Jyoti, “City as Durbar: Theater and Power in Imperial Delhi”, in *Forms of Dominance: On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992), 102-103.

projects.<sup>8</sup> Jyoti views the planning of New Delhi as symbolically expressing the authority of the British and subordination of the Indians. In arguing that urbanism was an integral part of the colonial project and that the British had particularly utilized the urban space of New Delhi to retell a specific narrative, Jyoti maintains that race was an essential criterion of colonial discourse that epitomized the notion of superiority in the “creation of difference between European and ‘native’, modern and traditional, health and disease”. Such an Orientalist mindset, Jyoti further argues, could be symbolized by the analogy of “dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity” in the understanding of the colonial city – a perspective that has been advanced in the urban planning of postcolonial Singapore as well.<sup>9</sup>

Like the Town Planning Committee established by the British to create New Delhi “based on a rhetoric of modernization and progress”, the story of British urban development in Singapore started with the Raffles Town Plan that “served as the critical manifesto of colonial urbanization in Singapore”.<sup>10</sup> For Raffles such a rhetoric of “modernization” seemed especially important for he “attempted to use the natives’ history to persuade them of the value of Western ideas”.<sup>11</sup> In the words of the same author, Raffles’ main goal was “the transfer of Western civilization to Southeast Asia and its native inhabitants”.<sup>12</sup> The basis of his “civilizing” mission was a hierarchy of grades of “civilized” people based on a certain ideology, in which the Europeans, relying on certain beliefs such as democracy, economic liberalism and justice, had placed themselves at the apex of the hierarchy.<sup>13</sup> The point to be recognized here is that the colonizer always represents the colony, in the words of Spurr, “as a vast cultural and geographical blankness” for the “inscription” of the

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<sup>8</sup> Jyoti, “City as Durbar”, 83.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.; See Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1983), 4, for a discussion of British cultural practices portraying India as feminine and Britain as masculine because of the latter’s political and socio-economic dominance as colonial master.

<sup>10</sup> Jyoti, “City as Durbar”, 94, 103; Rajpal Singh, *Street Naming and the Construction of the Colonial Narrative in Singapore: 1819-1942* (Academic Exercise: National University of Singapore, 2002), 12.

<sup>11</sup> Ellen C. Cangi, “Civilizing the People of Southeast Asia: Sir Stamford Raffles’ Town Plan for Singapore, 1819-23,” *Planning Perspectives* 8 (1993): 166.

<sup>12</sup> Cangi, “Civilizing the People of Southeast Asia”, 167.

<sup>13</sup> Rajpal Singh, *Street Naming*, 13.

values that the colonizer held, such as the idea of “modernity”.<sup>14</sup> If colonization is such a form of “inscription”, then it is natural that “naming and classifying” were vital strategies pursued in the colonial project.<sup>15</sup> It is only through such “naming and classifying”, in effect giving the colonized space and people meaning, that such values can be “inscribed”. Following Bach, therefore, “colonization depends not only on military power, technology, politics, and economics, but also on acts of naming”.<sup>16</sup> In fact, a reading of Singapore’s history shows that naming and classifying have been integral to the colonial project.

Most histories of Singapore written from a Western perspective still tend to glamorize the role of Sir Stamford Raffles. An inscription on the statue of Raffles opposite the Victoria Memorial Concert Hall unveiled on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the settlement reads:

...to the memory of  
Sir Stamford Raffles to whose  
Foresight and genius Singapore  
Owes its existence and prosperity...

A more probing analysis is available in Alatas’ book *Thomas Stamford Raffles – Schemer or Reformer?* He quotes a letter dated 9 October 1820 from Raffles to Thomas Murdoch from Benkulu that reveals much about British values at that time, and the colonisers’ belief in the superiority of the European.<sup>17</sup> Raffles wrote: “The most rapid advances have probably been made when great power has fallen into enlightened and able hands...it would be folly to conceive the careless independence of the savage as deserving equal respect”.<sup>18</sup> Raffles went on, “Whether the power to which they [the natives] bow be the despotism of force, or the despotism of superior

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<sup>14</sup> David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, And Imperial Administration* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1996), 7. The colonizer sought to heroically inscribe the English character on a ‘blank land’.

<sup>15</sup> Jyotsna G Singh, *Colonial Narratives / Cultural Dialogues: ‘Discoveries’ of India in the Language of Colonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Ann Bach, *Colonial Transformations: The Cultural Production of the New Atlantic World, 1580-1640* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 67.

<sup>17</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, *Thomas Stamford Raffles, 1781-1826: Schemer or Reformer?* (Singapore: Angus and Robertson, 1971).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

intellect, it is a step in their progress which cannot be passed”.<sup>19</sup> Raffles believed totally in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon; it was ingrained in him as it was in his contemporaries. Raffles also suggested that Christianity should be spread “to cultivate the waste and barren soil of the native mind”.<sup>20</sup> All in all, his vision was the colonial vision that was to pursue “the desire to emphasise racial and cultural difference as a means of establishing superiority”.<sup>21</sup>

Asians were expected to accept a subordinate status to the colonial personnel and provide the labour force for British and Western capitalism. Raffles said of his plan for the establishment of European colonies in Sumatra: “The Chinese and natives would be manual labourers, as the Negroes are in the West Indies”.<sup>22</sup> He wrote of the Chinese that they were ‘crafty’ and a ‘very dangerous people’.<sup>23</sup> Arabs, he wrote, “were useless and idle consumers of the produce of the ground”.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, Raffles’ philosophy of racial hierarchies, paternalism and autocracy appears to bear resonance to the post-independent nation’s governance of the state.

### **3.2 Racial Zoning and Segregation**

Colonialist ideology was manifested as the Raffles’ Town Plan for the urban development of Singapore. The Plan was conceived for the purposes of establishing, systematising and maintaining colonial rule, and for inscribing modernity as part of a scheme to create a certain civilisational hierarchy. At the beginning of his most lengthy instructions to the Town Committee in 1822, Raffles pointed out to its European members that “timely attention should be paid...to the peculiar character and institutions of the several classes of inhabitants of which the society will be composed”, and that the town should be planned on the basis of the “nature and

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<sup>19</sup> Alatas, *Thomas Stamford Raffles*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Alatas, *Thomas Stamford Raffles*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

occupation of the several classes of people” which occupy it.<sup>25</sup> Raffles had imagined a hierarchy of classes for colonial Singapore in which some were more ‘civilised’ than others and instructed that the merchant community, “because they belonged to a higher and respectable class”, was to be at the “centre” of this new town, and the rest of the town was to be made up by the labouring class, with no space for the agricultural class.<sup>26</sup> Raffles had therefore significantly stressed that the mercantile community should have the choice sites and, in the words of Buckley, “all the facilities which the natural advantages of the port afford[ed]”.<sup>27</sup> Such a policy, says Wurtzburg, justified his objective of making trading and commerce the main rationale for Singapore’s existence and future.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, economic interests have continued to dictate government policy and spatial order ever since.

Such considerations in the Town Plan ensured that the European settlement was focused at the heart of the town. The health, safety, and fear of native “contamination” also suggested separation of the European community from the ethnic communities. As Raffles instructed Farquhar on 25 June 1819: ‘it will be necessary to allot sufficient space in a convenient and proper situation for officers’ bungalows’.<sup>29</sup> His plan also specified house sizes, street dimensions, and even the materials to be used. This was prompted not only by practical matters such as the efficient movement of people and vehicles, the risk of fire, convenient surveillance, and considerations of climate, but also by the need for control and discipline. Ironically, however, what gave momentum to British planning practices was the number of town fires that resulted in accelerated urban renewal. These fires have been well documented: interestingly, as Tremewan has noted, similar fires have also occurred at regular intervals in areas earmarked for large-scale housing development in early post-independence days.<sup>30</sup> Unsubstantiated rumours have circulated that this

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<sup>25</sup> “Raffles’ Instructions on Town Development” as reprinted in Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore 1819-1867* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984, first published in 1902), 82.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> C.E.Wurtzburg, *Raffles of the Eastern Isles* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954).

<sup>29</sup> Straits Settlements Records, L10, National Library, Singapore.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore* (London and New York: St Martin’s Press, 1994), 47.

was a carefully planned and engineered covert strategy by the government as a quick-fix solution to evict squatters from the land – without having to pay them compensation – which would then make way for housing development. The Bukit Ho Swee fire tragedy of 25 May 1965 that paved the way for a massive government Housing Development Board apartment complex is a prime example.

The European settlement boasted of a spacious administrative enclave (still called Empress Place to this day), a large *padang* (meaning field in Malay), a Europeans-only club called the Singapore Cricket Club at one end of the padang, and an imposing Anglican church (St Andrews Cathedral). The creation of an impression of colonial grandeur was the main consideration in the design of the European part of the town. The European Town had impressive architecture in bungalows with sprawling compounds, open spaces, wide boulevards, parks and promenades in front of the Esplanade to create “a front where wealth and power of the town were concentrated”.<sup>31</sup> The European community, consisting of the administration and business elite, lived in the central city area north of the Singapore River in well-defined residential areas like the Orchard-Tanglin-Holland Road belt. Prominent British administrators and merchants settled in areas which are still identified, to this day, by street names like Scott, Guthrie, Kerr, Spottiswood, Bain, Oxley, Napier, Shenton, Montgomery, Crane, Elliot, Fullerton and many others. Europeans, who separated work from residence, typically occupied bungalows with large verandahs standing in spacious gardens and compounds built in an architectural style imported by the British from India (see Chapter 3.4 and Plates 1 and 2).<sup>32</sup>

In sharp contrast to the European Town and bungalows were the congested spaces in the Asian *kampungs* where the maintenance of “orderliness” was the prime consideration.<sup>33</sup> Overcrowding led to social and trading activities spilling into the streets, which fulfilled many of the functions that the home unit lacked. Behind the

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<sup>31</sup> Jon S H Lim, *Colonial Architecture and Architects of Georgetown (Penang) and Singapore between 1786 and 1819* (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 1990), 86; Victor Savage, “Street Culture in Colonial Singapore” in *Public Space: Design, Use and Management*, eds. Chua and Edwards (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1991).

<sup>32</sup> Anthony King, *The Bungalow: A Product of Several Cultures* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984). King argues that verandahs were good for colonial surveillance of the native visitor, as well as being barriers to entry inside the house/drawing area or salon.

<sup>33</sup> Jon Lim, *Colonial Architecture*; Victor Savage, “Street Culture in Colonial Singapore”.

“vibrancy of the street life were the unhygienic and overcrowded conditions of living”.<sup>34</sup> In colonial discourse, as Yeoh and Kong have described, “Chinatown was often depicted as filthy and pestilential, and an area of moral decay evidenced by the gambling houses, opium dens, dimly-lit brothels and higgledy-piggledy disorder of Chinese street-life.”<sup>35</sup> Under the colonizer’s gaze, the streets became places of “fantastic colouring from ugliness unspeakable”.<sup>36</sup> According to some accounts, there were “violent and vivid contrasts” between the ugly seething squalor of the native town and the “paradise” of the European residential area.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, for the Europeans, there was no street culture as their social life was carried out in their grand bungalows and compounds. Hence, it is not surprising that the European part of the town, which did not have a bazaar economy, was perceived as “dull and sleepy looking ... where no life and movement prevailed around the shops”.<sup>38</sup>

The Raffles Town Plan retold the colonial narrative through racial segregation. There were to be Chinese, Indian (then called Chuliah) and Malay (called Bugis) *kampungs* reflecting the major groups of inhabitants in Singapore as well as a European settlement located away from these areas. Raffles laid down firm lines for the development of these *kampungs* and for the residential separation of the various communities according to ethnic origin and occupational interests (see Map 1). The *kampungs* were to be created with work, residence, recreation and the bazaar contained within the same area and organized around rows of shophouses with a series of tightly bound cross-streets running around narrow rectangular grids so as to isolate and contain the existence of the natives within.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, the southern central core of the city (the zone of mercantile trade) was divided into various ‘racial’

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<sup>34</sup> Iskander Mydin, *Pioneers of the Streets*, (Singapore: Arts, Antiques and Antiquities, 1989), 1.

<sup>35</sup> Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong: *Portraits of Places, History, Community and Identity in Singapore*, eds. Yeoh and Kong (Singapore: Times Edition, 1995), 64.

<sup>36</sup> Victor R Savage, “Human-environment Relations: Singapore’s Environmental Ideology”, in *Imagining Singapore*, eds. C K Ban, A Pakir, & C K Tong (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Lim, *Colonial Architecture and Architects of Georgetown (Penang) and Singapore*, 84.



quarters for different groups of migrants.<sup>40</sup> This plan for ethnic separation was the centerpiece of the Raffles Town Plan and a physical manifestation of the 'divide and rule' policy for which British were renowned.

Raffles had directed his Town Committee that "in the allotment of the Native divisions of the town ... the first in importance of these is beyond doubt the Chinese".<sup>41</sup> They were, according to Raffles, "peculiar attractions" that Singapore had for this "industrious race"<sup>42</sup> which had contributed immensely to Singapore's commercial success. The Chinese immigrants were the most numerous and because of their strong trading inclinations were allotted land second only in location and importance to the European Town, despite Raffles' personal dislike of these migrants. An important characteristic of early town planning was therefore the virtual monopolisation by the Chinese of the trading and entrepot sectors of the economy because the British considered these functions as pivotal to the success of the new colony. This economic strategy resulted in the spatial organisation of the Chinese in a congested central location in the vicinity of the commercial core (presently called Boat Quay and Clarke Quay). Merely a handful in 1819, they grew to about 50,000 in 1860 (63% of the total population) and 164,000 by 1901 making up 71% of the total population.<sup>43</sup> Most of the Chinese 'coolies' were immigrants belonging to the artisan and peasant classes that vastly outnumbered the merchants and traders. They were extremely hardworking and laboured to make as much money as possible before returning to retire in China<sup>44</sup>. Most of them came from different provinces in China and, because their social organization, both for legal and illegal (especially secret societies, gambling, gangster fights) purposes, was strong, Raffles ensured that they maintained their territorial distinctions (based on province, clan and dialect) when

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<sup>40</sup> Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement, 1768-1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 22; Khun Eng Kuah, "State, Conservation and Ethnicization of Little India in Singapore," *Urban Anthropology* 27, 1 (1998): 1-48.

<sup>41</sup> Raffles' Instructions, 83.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> *Journal of the Island Society Singapore* ('Hsin-she Hsueh-pao') 1, 1 (1967).

<sup>44</sup> Brenda S.A. Yeoh *Contesting Space: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore*. Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996; Edwin Lee, *The British as Rulers: Governing Multi-Racial Singapore 1867-1914* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1991); Martin Perry, Lily Kong, and Brenda Yeoh. *Singapore: A Developmental City State* (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 1997).

establishing Kampong China or Chinatown. In this way, he felt less threatened by their presence. The Chinese characteristically erected two-storey terrace “shophouses”, as noted by many writers (see Chapter 3.4 and Plate 3). The Chinese quarter reflected the privileged position that the group had in the British plan for the colony, when compared with the Malay and Indian quarters of the town.

Malays often had little access to relatively lucrative jobs in the commerce and banking sectors of the colonial economy, occupying a peripheral position as has been characterised by a number of authors.<sup>45</sup> This was also translated into marginalisation in geographical terms, with Malays virtually absent from the central parts of the city. The Malays lived in Malay-style kampung houses built of plank and attap or on stilts located in the tidal swamps near the river mouth. (see Chapter 3.4 and Plates 4 and 5) An important spatial requirement for the Malays was the mosque in the centre of their kampung. The marginal position of the Malays was reflected in the town plan that Raffles drew up. The assumption was that the Malays did not need a separate urban, ordered space as they were not expected to contribute to the new, modern capitalism of Singapore. The place of the Malay within the British colonial narrative is best illustrated in these words:

The Malays were a very peaceful and somewhat indolent people. They were clever craftsmen, fishermen and agriculturalists but were not fond of laborious undertakings... The Malays viewed without resentment the incoming of the more powerful and industrious Chinese and Europeans. As a result, they did not contribute much to the development of the island in the early day.<sup>46</sup>

The Malays (consisting of local Malays, Javanese, Arabs and Bugis) were therefore consigned to Kampong Glam, an area beyond the town limits between the coast and the Rochor River because of their strong religious affiliation with the Malay Sultan.<sup>47</sup> Street names further reinforced their position in the peripheries of colonial society.

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<sup>45</sup> For example, see Riaz Hassan, *Singapore: Society in Transition*, ed. Riaz Hassan (Kuala Lumpur and New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>46</sup> Tan Bee Choo, *Street Names in Selected Areas of Singapore: A Study in Historical Geography* (Academic Exercise: University of Singapore, 1977), 34-35.

<sup>47</sup> In its early beginnings, the settlement that grew around the port was called the town. The first boundary of the Town (the Municipal area) was laid down in 1887 (S E Teo, *Residential Mobility in HDB Flats and Private Housing in Singapore, 1975/76*).

Sandhu says that social status determined the physical distance of the various groups from the European-dominated centre of the town, although there was no official policy on these lines. Consequently, the Indian communities were “in the eyes of some of the colonial elite forever doomed, irrespective of their economic or social position, to be the coolies and ‘blackmen’ of Singapore...”.<sup>48</sup> Whether or not Sandhu’s claim is true, it is a fact that the Indian concentrations within the town usually tended to be further away from the centre of town and the European settlement, unlike the Chinese or Eurasians who were well placed above the Indians in the colonial social hierarchy. In catering for the living space for the Indians, Raffles wrote to the Town Committee in 1822 about the:

“advantage of allotting a separate division for the town class of *Chuliahs*<sup>49</sup> up to the Singapore River, and this will of course be done with due consideration of their expected numbers, and the necessity of their residence being in the vicinity of the place where their services are most likely to be called for”.<sup>50</sup>

Accordingly, Kampong Chulia was set aside for the Indians. Like the Chinese, Indian immigrants arrived in Singapore mainly as traders and labourers, although some came as garrison troops and convicts.<sup>51</sup> The Indian population was mainly clustered on the edge of the central town in and around the Serangoon Road-Kampung Kapur area, now known as Little India, although smaller pockets could also be found in various parts of the city such as concentrations of South Indian *chettians* (moneylenders), Tamil-Muslim traders, moneychangers, petty shopkeepers, boatmen and quayside workers on the fringe of the central business area. Indian traders and merchants built houses that served as workplace and residence, mainly in the Little India area and Arab Street precincts.

The colonial urban project therefore meant that the British demarcated land based on race and vocation and compartmentalized the economy, resulting in the creation of racial enclaves like Kampong China, Kampong Glam as well as Kampong

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<sup>48</sup> Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*, 779.

<sup>49</sup> A term used for the South Indians that is now obsolete.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Samuel Dhoraingam, *Robert Fullerton, Governor of the Straits Settlements, 1824-1830*. (Academic Exercise: Department of History, University of Malaya, 1961), 197.

<sup>51</sup> Constance Mary Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819-1975* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977), 37. An in-depth description of Indian migration to Singapore is at Chapter 2.2.

Chulia. Consequently, urban planning practices, shaped by almost 150 years of colonial rule, were reflected in the partitioned city that the local leadership inherited when it took office in 1965.

The Raffles Plan was hugely significant to the development of the colonial city as it inscribed public order in space, mapped out the spatial configuration of the town's built environment on both sides of the Singapore River, and spatially defined the distribution of the 'Asian' population. The design of the built environment became in the hands of the British administration an instrument for producing power relations, constituting what Brenda Yeoh calls, "a strategy of surveillance".<sup>52</sup> The main focus was the remodeling of the town to facilitate public administration and order, maximise business activity and instill discipline among the diverse groups through a culture of control – a feature of governance that the post-independent leadership has pursued with greater intensity.

The colonial practice of naming and classifying by means of racial zoning and segregation in Singapore was reinforced by street naming and built forms based on ethnic affiliation.<sup>53</sup> Street names and various built forms in each area further served to reinforce the colonial narrative. Anthony King draws a parallel in the colonial planning of New Delhi, arguing that for various economic, social, political and racial reasons, the indigenous and colonial parts of Delhi were kept apart and urban planning practices followed suit. King argues that "norms and forms" which informed the built environment of the colonial society served not only to reflect colonial aspirations but were also used "both consciously and unconsciously, as social technologies, as strategies of power to incorporate, categorise, discipline, control and reform 'the inhabitants of the city'".<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, 146.

<sup>53</sup> The segregation of racial communities in colonial cities was an important instrument that the colonial authorities used to more effectively manage 'native' affairs. It asserted the colonial construction of the identity of the group, helping it play the role it was allocated in colonial society and politics. In this way also, segregation reinforced colonial stereotypes of the particular group. See Anthony D King, "Colonialism and the Development of the Modern South Asian City: Some Theoretical Considerations", in *The City in South Asia: Pre-modern and Modern*, eds. Kenneth Ballhatchet and John Harrison (London: Curzon Press, 1980), 14-15.

<sup>54</sup> Anthony King, *Urbanism, Colonialism and the World Economy: Cultural and Spatial Foundations of the World Urban System* (London: Routledge, 1990), 9. He explains how the power structure inherent in western industrial colonialism, as well as social and cultural factors and technology, impacted on the development of patterns of urbanisation and physical and spatial forms of the built environment in non-Western colonial societies.

### 3.3 Street Naming

The British policy of racial segregation and zoning left an indelible mark on the system of street naming in colonial Singapore – a further manifestation of the construction of power and hegemony so integral to the project of colonialism. The provision of roads was an essential part of Raffles' plan for urban development – in fact, by 1821, only two years after the colonial founding of Singapore, the colony is said to have possessed 15 miles of road, then already considered extensive.<sup>55</sup> More importantly than the mere provision and naming of streets for the colony was the fact that the Town Committee regulated the construction of all streets. The streets were given a standard width and were made to intersect at right angles, resembling a grid pattern that is the most common design of cities that have been planned through history.<sup>56</sup> Kostof says that this design has two main purposes. First, it is meant to make possible “orderly settlement, colonization in its broad sense” and, second, it is used “as an instrument of modernization, and of contrast to what existed that was not as orderly”.<sup>57</sup> Given the fact that there were no roads or streets in pre-colonial Singapore, it would appear that the introduction of the grid pattern in Singapore fulfilled both the above stated functions.<sup>58</sup> As such, the laying of streets in Singapore was more than just a roading project; it was in fact, an inscribing of power and modernity, a representation to the effect that the British were the ones to bring a modern, rational way of structuring space and society, as opposed to the ‘disorderliness’ or nothingness of what then existed in Singapore.<sup>59</sup>

The Town Committee also decreed that “each street should receive some

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<sup>55</sup> Lim Siu Hong, “History of Land Use Pattern in Singapore: 1819-1867” (Academic Exercise: National University of Singapore, 1983), 3-4.

<sup>56</sup> Cangi, “Civilizing the People”, 177; Cheng Hui Cheng, *Singapore: Early Town Development, 1819-1836* (Academic Exercise - Dept. of History, National University of Singapore, 1982), 10. In fact the Town Committee was just adhering to Raffles' directive in this regard. See “Raffles' Instructions”, 84; Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings through History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 95.

<sup>57</sup> Kostof, *The City Shaped*, 102.

<sup>58</sup> Tan Bee Choo, *Street Names in Selected Areas of Singapore*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> See Spiro Kostof, *The City Assembled: The Elements of Urban Form through History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 194.

appropriate name”.<sup>60</sup> The need for “appropriate” names would therefore reflect the ideological framework that Raffles aimed to realise in his plan for the town, namely, the promotion of the construction of the colonial project.<sup>61</sup> Such naming practices, it has been argued by historians, are integral to the theme of “discovery” that the colonizer often employs. By representing this new space according to the names they accorded them, the British were telling the story of their arrival, leaving an indelible mark on the landscape that reflected the perception that it was they who had built these spaces and named them accordingly. The very fact that all new streets in the centre of the town were to have English names further reinforces the narrative of the British “founding” of Singapore. Busy CBD streets like Stamford Road, Coleman Street, Victoria Street, Queen Street, Albert Street, Shenton Way, Robinson Road, Cecil Street, Connaught Drive, St Andrew’s Road, Fort Canning, Waterloo Street, Nicoll Highway, Farquhar Street and Fullerton Road are still significant thoroughfares in Singapore’s urban landscape today.

Street names were assigned by the Town Committee appointed in 1822 to “appropriate and mark out the quarters or departments of the several classes of the native population” so as to “prevent confusion and disputes”.<sup>62</sup> As I have explained in 3.2, the committee designated separate divisions by racial groups: the European settlement was dignified by the term town, but the Asian communities were relegated to separate *kampungs*. Accordingly, street names in each division were identified with the intended inhabitants, thereby creating a system of street names that associated racial and cultural identity with specific places in the colonial consciousness. Most municipal street names honoured power-holding Europeans rather than those of the residents of specific areas. Such perceptions were based on a street-naming system that was centered on colonial ideas of landscape ordering and urban functioning and what a colonial city should be. Street nomenclature therefore became, in the words of Yeoh, “a means by which the authorities were able to project on to the urban landscape their perceptions of what different areas within the city represented”, though official street names constituted but one layer of the complex

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<sup>60</sup> “Raffles’ Instructions”, 84.

<sup>61</sup> Rajpal Singh, *Street Naming*, 17.

<sup>62</sup> Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*.

built environment.<sup>63</sup> These perceptions of the authorities typified one form of ‘text’, but unfortunately the consumption of its meaning, according to Gresswell, left behind no visible ‘text’.<sup>64</sup>

Side by side with official street names assigned and approved by the Municipal Commissioners (as evidenced by the minutes of the meetings of the Municipal Commissioners available in the National Archives), there existed alternative systems of street names that originated among the various communities who lived in or used the streets. Hence, although official street names were given by the colonial administration and road signboards were placed at the corner of every street, on which was inscribed “the name by which the street shall be known”, the Asian occupants saw little relevance in them and devised their own naming practices, languages and cultural as well as spatial orientations for these streets.

Their alternative systems of designations had localised representations of meaning and interpretation derived informally from community-defined conventions and parameters. There was a close association between the identification of places and the everyday life of the local groups denoting specific trading, artisan and agricultural activities. Each group had its own spatial cosmology and street signs which were valueless and meaningless to those who possessed different spatial orientations. For example, if a British subject asked a Cantonese what the street name or place was, and then asked a Hokkien person next, and then a Tamil person before finally seeing the official sign on the street corner, he or she would have been served four different conceptions of the same street. What is revealing here is the nature of cultural interaction and the fusion of one language into another when one language fails to provide adequate tools for comprehending an institution such as the police. In brief, there was little correlation between municipally imposed and ethnically derived street names. Whereas municipal street names primarily sought to identify the urban landscape with civic notions of order, ethnic resistance linked streets to local features, symbols, legends, trades and activities that formed a significant role in daily experience and social practice. The two systems represented different and competing ways of signifying the landscape and therefore frequently clashed.

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<sup>63</sup> Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, 221.

<sup>64</sup> Tim Gresswell, “Night Discourse: Producing/Consuming Meaning on the Street” in *Images of the Street: Planning, Identity and Control in Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 273.

This dual system of identification, namely, the official network of street names and the names attached by indigenous and non-European immigrants, provides an understanding of contrasting representations and uses of the colonial landscape. The capacity of the local communities to develop and use their own names and signifiers to denote and differentiate parts of the landscape implies the diversity of socio-cultural influences that each community brought to bear on the urban landscape as well as it reveals their ability to subvert the power relations that colonialism operates on. If according to Michel de Certeau a city could be narrated through language, then in colonial Singapore it could be said that there were multiple spatial narratives in the interpretation of streets. Despite the official use of street names on the maps, it did not mean that the formal names erased cultural realities and material practices of the various communities. In fact, I would argue that the various groups continued with their own naming practices, which while having little relationship with the official street names became interwoven into the intricate fabric that was cosmopolitan Singapore. Street names therefore represented discursive realities that provided a striking contrast between colonial landscapes that were shaped, systematised and rationalized by the colonial authorities, then resisted and negotiated by the Asian communities.

The ideological project of street naming supports the Gramscian theory that hegemony is reflected not only in the way power and control is exercised by the colonial administration but also how it is challenged and resisted by the local communities. The Municipal Commissioners, a select group consisting mainly of Europeans and one or two members representing the Asian communities, were able to obtain implied consent in Gramscian terms, for the “values, norms, perceptions and beliefs... of [the] central authority”, thereby proving that colonial hegemony does not operate on mere coercion alone but with the active and voluntary consent of a select group as described above.<sup>65</sup> Colonial officials thus ensured that hegemony was being constructed in the project of street naming on the basis of acceptance for the basic themes of the colonial project. Rather than creating confrontation or opposition with the colonized, they sought domination by what Spurr calls “inclusion and

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<sup>65</sup> Joseph V Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 39.



domestication”.<sup>66</sup> Yet as I have described in preceding paragraphs, the public at large subverted street names created by the municipal committee and resorted to their own interpretations and meanings.

Colonial and municipal authorities lamented at what they saw as the “haphazard and imprecise manner in which Asians identified places and furnished addresses” as Yeoh has described.<sup>67</sup> She says that the Malays took “little notice of streets, and as a rule, only describe[d] places by kampongs” or geographical features, while Firmstone says that to the Chinese, “accuracy is the last thing that strikes them as essential”.<sup>68</sup> Asian disregard for municipal street names had practical significance for the authorities who were involved in governing and policing the city. Often addresses could not be ascertained accurately for instituting arrests, serving court summons, or tracing the spread of infectious diseases with the result that “the non-comprehension and non-acceptance of municipally assigned street names and the use of alternative systems by the ethnic communities rendered these communities less open to the surveillance strategies of the colonial authorities”.<sup>69</sup>

The history of British rule and urban transformation in Singapore from the early colonial period to integration with the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 and finally to independence in 1965 is manifested in street names, especially in the nature of the names and the lingua adopted in the naming of the streets. Most of the streets named during the colonial period bore the hegemonic imprint of British rule. After independence in 1965, street names, apart from being named after persons, places, topographical features and serial numbering, tend to emphasise local identity, success, prosperity, harmony and the spirit of the new modern multi-cultural and multi-racial nation state. Sometimes the new nation state has found it necessary to rename certain streets in line with its principle of hegemonic ideology in economic, political, administrative and social considerations. This necessity accords with its street-naming policy of giving equal treatment to the four official languages (i.e. English,

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<sup>66</sup> Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 32.

<sup>67</sup> Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, 233.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid; H.W.Firmstone, “Chinese Names of Streets and Places in Singapore and the Malay Peninsula,” *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 42 (1905): 53 – 208.

<sup>69</sup> Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, 234.

Malay, Chinese and Tamil) in order to reflect the multi-ethnic nature of Singapore society.

### 3.4 Urban built forms

The British policy of racial zoning and segregation in colonial Singapore was extended by another specific colonial narrative – that of urban built forms. As early as 1869, Alfred Russel Wallace, the famous naturalist commented that “the town comprises handsome buildings and churches, Mohamedan mosques, Hindoo temples, Chinese joss-houses, good European houses, massive warehouses, queer old Kling and China bazaars and long suburbs of Chinese and Malay cottages”.<sup>70</sup> The ambiguity and variety of these urban forms in Singapore is testimony to the fact that representations of the urban built environment generate open-ended questions about power, difference and identity, leading to, in the words of Sharon Zukin, a “struggle for interpretation”.<sup>71</sup> While communal interests and occupational necessity meant that the local communities had little say in the areas that were allocated to them under the Raffles Town Plan, it is possible to read in Singapore’s colonial built forms the struggle for interpretation and meaning by the various groups. These communities displayed competing meanings and perceptions in the general practices of daily living and more specifically in various built forms like dwelling houses and the five-foot way or verandah.

The colonial bungalow, for example, became the coloniser’s vehicle for political control, social ideals, and cultural values (Plates 1 and 2). The *attap* (thatched roof) hut remained the structurally simple dwelling of the indigenous Malay who lived in the vernacular tradition of *kampung* life (Plates 4 and 5). By and large, the shophouse, in which two and three storey row houses are connected at the street by a continuous covered walkway or verandah, came to be associated with the Chinese (Plate 3). It has been argued by many writers that the shophouse could have arisen out of the Raffles Town Plan’s stipulations for the buildings and their continuous verandah, with rooms separated by airwells. A shophouse characteristically features a five-foot way or verandahed walkway fronting the house.

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<sup>70</sup> Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago* (London: Macmillan & Company, 1869; reprint, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>71</sup> Sharon Zukin, ‘Space and Symbols in an Age of Decline’ in *Re-Presenting the City: Ethnicity, Capital, and Culture in the Twenty-first Century Metropolis*, ed. Anthony D King (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 43.

This covered five-foot way, typically an arched opening, joins one house with the rest on the street front, thus creating a continuous walkway on the front facade of the shophouse block (Plate 3). In his instructions to the Town Committee, Raffles had instructed that “each house should have a verandah of a certain depth open at all times as a continued and covered passage on each side of the street”.<sup>72</sup> The verandah was, and still is, in some urban areas of Singapore, including Little India, a focus of life and trade. The five-foot way provides a background for some of the tensions that developed over the definition and use of public space in the local historical context. Tensions arose because the Municipal authorities sought to clear the verandah of obstruction and congestion, while the migrant communities associated this space with different meanings, uses and values. Given contrasting municipal and local conceptions, the verandah soon became a site of conflict and resistance in an everyday sense as well as during flashpoints, such as the so-called 'verandah riots' of 1888. By drawing on Henri Lefebvre's concepts of 'representation of spaces' and 'spaces of representation', the verandah, in the Singapore context, is therefore a fine illustration of how space can contain multiple definitions and, as a result, is often 'contested' in ideological and material terms.<sup>73</sup>

### 3.5 Conclusion

Interrogating the colonial narrative therefore gives us a unique understanding of the built environment in colonial urbanism and of the dominance-dependence equation and the corresponding counter strategies that marked colonial rule. Urban planning projects and practices, such as racial zoning and segregation of the various communities, street-naming and various built forms like dwelling houses and the five-foot way or verandah, became symbols of colonial domination and the subordination of the ethnic communities economically, intellectually, physically, symbolically and emotionally. Because the dominant colonial administration had the power to fundamentally create and transform the built environment of the colonized society to promote its own social, cultural, economic, ideological and political interests, colonial urban planning projects and practices have perpetuated unequal social relations

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<sup>72</sup> Raffles' Instructions to Town Committee, 4 November 1822 (reproduced in Charles B Buckley, *An Anecdotal History*, 84).

<sup>73</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D Nicholson Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

between the colonial power and the colonized society resulting in resistance, conflict, negotiation and compromise in the daily lives and practices of the ethnic population. In other words, says Abidin Kusno, they generate a relationship between space and power – a relationship that is particularly contestational between the colonizers and the colonized because it produces complex social and symbolic meanings.<sup>74</sup> These meanings have particular relevance in the context of my thesis as I interrogate the built environment of the Indians in Singapore in the next and subsequent chapters with reference to the social engineering policies enforced by the state.

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<sup>74</sup> Abidin Kusno, *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Plates 1 and 2

Bungalow





Plate 3

Shophouse in Little India's Serangoon Road



Plates 4 and 5

Attap hut







Plate 6

Serangoon Road on a festive day



Plates 7 and 8

Parrot 'fortune-teller' in five-foot way along Serangoon Road



Plates 9 and 10

Indian foreign workers congregating in Little India





Plate 11

“Thaipusam” religious/cultural festival in Little India



Plate 12

Trishaws in procession through the streets of Little India



Plate 13

Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple



Plate 14

Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple





Plate 15

A typical spice shop in Little India



Plate 16

Mustafa Centre



Plate 17

Plaiting flower garlands on five-foot way in Little India



Plates 18 and 19

*Dosai* meal at vegetarian restaurant in Serangoon Road





Plate 20

A spicy banana leaf meal

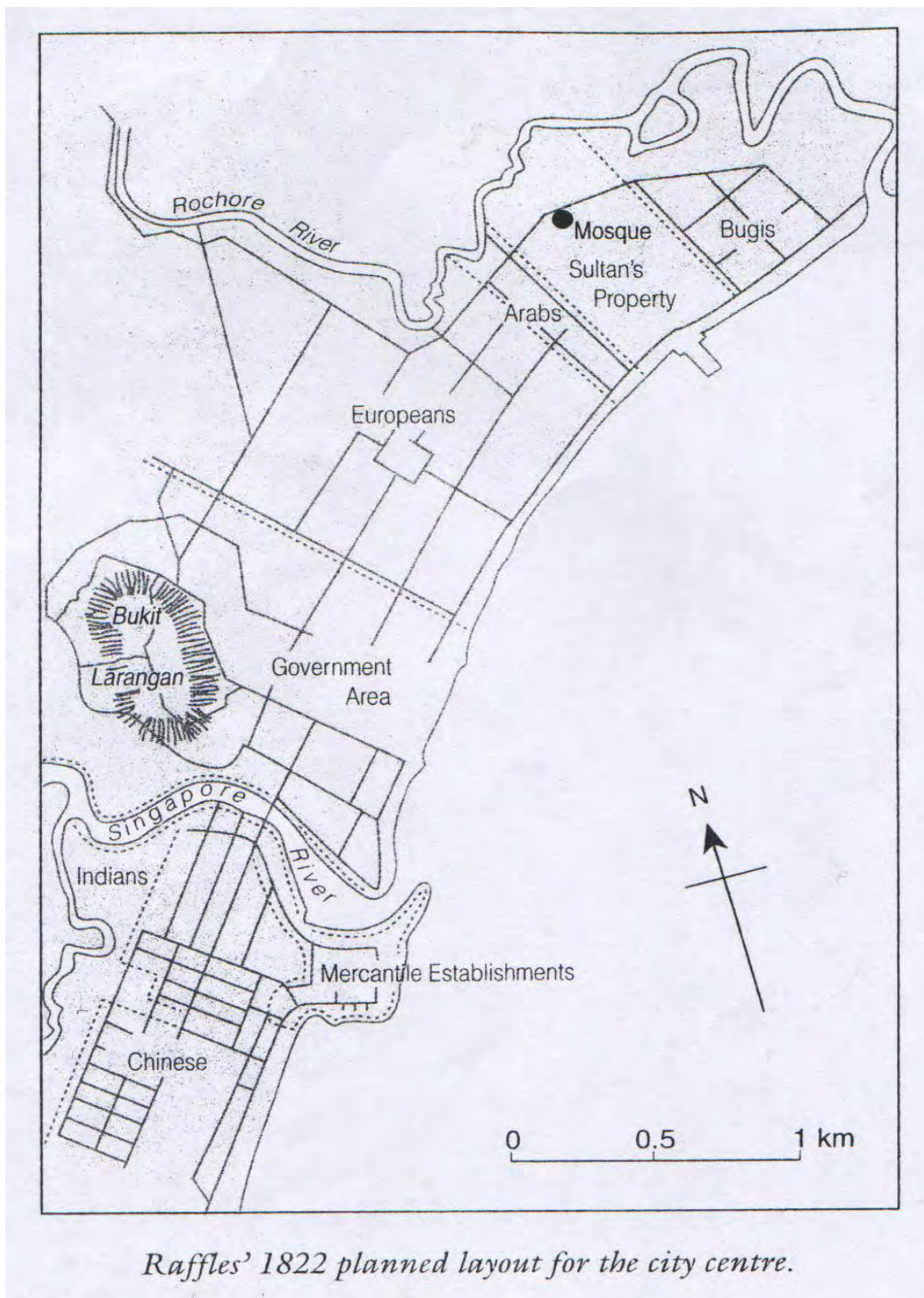


Plates 21 and 22

Goldsmith shop in Little India



Map 1



Raffles Town plan of 1822 for the segregation of the races in Singapore, derived from Lt. Jackson's Plan of 1822. The European Town and Chinese *kampung* are on either side of the central business and government area, while the other groups (Arabs, Bugis, Indians and natives, which is, Malays) are in smaller *kampungs* around the periphery.

Source: Eng, 1992.



Map 2



Map of Little India

## PLACES OF INTEREST


### ROUTE 1

- 1 Tekka Market
- 2 Ellison Building
- 3 Banana Leaf Apolo Restaurant
- 4 Muthu's Curry
- 5 Little India's Arts Belt
- 6 Ananda Bhavan
- 7 Little India Arcade
- 7A Handlooms
- 7B Henna store
- 7C Ganesan Vilas
- 8 Flower garland store
- 9 Masjid Abdul Gafoor
- 10 The Church of True Light
- 11 Komalas
- 12 Indian Fortune Teller with her Parrot
- 13 Traditional spice grinder
- 14 Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple

### EXTENSION

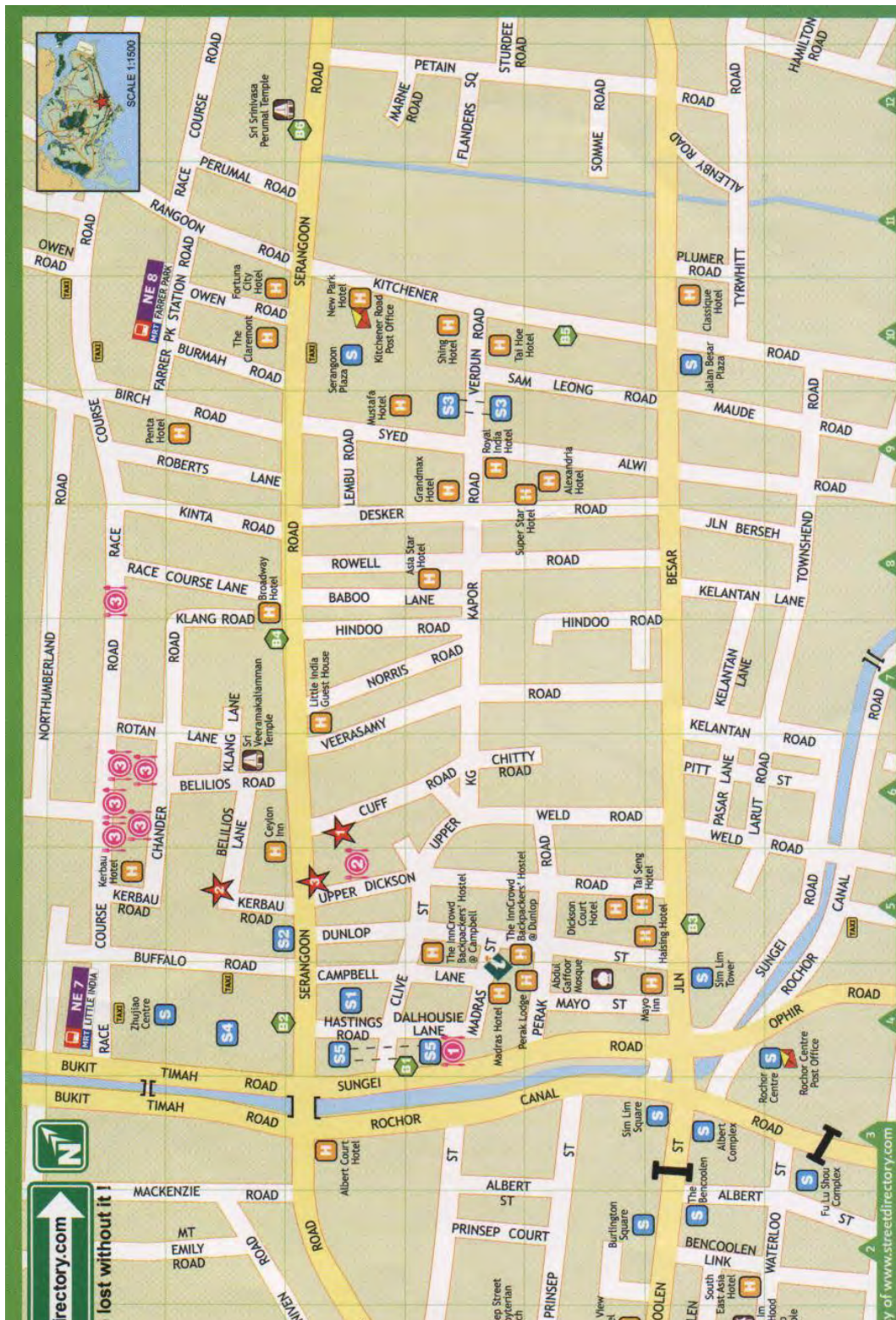
- 15 Kampong Kapor Methodist Church
- 16 Angullia Mosque
- 17 Mustafa Centre
- 18 Raj Restaurant
- 19 Sri Vadapathira Kaliamman Temple
- 20 Leong San Buddhist Temple
- 21 Sakya Muni Buddha Gaya Temple
- 22 Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple

### AUDIO TOUR

-  Desire Paths



Map 3



Guided walking/ trishaw tour map of Little India

Source: Singapore Tourism Board

## **PART II**

### **‘INTEGRATION’, ‘RACE’ AND ETHNICITY IN THE NATION STATE**

## CHAPTER 4

### RACIAL POLITICS AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT OF THE INDIANS IN SINGAPORE – WHO AND WHAT IS AN ‘INDIAN’?

What does it mean to be ‘Indian’ outside India?

- Salman Rushdie<sup>1</sup>

...beneath the surface of a superficial likeness, behind the impressions that he gives to make him less distinguishable and beyond the stereotype that others see in him, he will be holding on and clinging to his Indian heritage while incorporating what is good in the larger world.

- Chandrashekhar Sastry<sup>2</sup>

#### 4.1 Introduction

While the dynamics of the origins of Indian settlement in Singapore have been explored in the preceding chapters, the complex question of who and what is an Indian in the context of the state’s corporatist management of ethnicity has yet to be discussed. This is because, as previous researchers have discovered, the Indians in Singapore as elsewhere in Southeast Asia “are the most understudied of all the ethnic minorities”.<sup>3</sup> This situation needs to be interrogated, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, because several issues and contradictions complicate the state’s multiracial, multicultural articulation of racial politics with one of its component ‘races’. Although non-Indian Singaporeans and visitors to Singapore make sense of all Indians in a particular way by virtue of the latter’s common geographical origins in the Indian subcontinent, different community groups within the all-encompassing state-engineered ‘Indian race’ react differently to the intersection of ethnic and national production of identity and hence this needs some elaboration. How are the

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<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticisms, 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> Chandrashekhar Sastry, *The Non-Resident Indian* (Singapore: Printworld Services Pte. Ltd., 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Lian Kwen Fee and Tong Chee Kiong, “Constructing and Deconstructing Singapore Society” in *The Making of Singapore Sociology*, eds. Tong Chee Kiong and Lian Kwen Fee (Singapore: Times Academia Press, 2002), 14.

politics of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ manifested in the Singapore Indians?<sup>4</sup> As I will show in this and subsequent chapters, Indians in Singapore face a dilemma reconciling racial politics, ethnic identity and national identity, a relationship that will be analysed with reference to the dominant state discourse and to the various social engineering instruments of the state. While the other ethnic groups in Singapore have also to grapple with these identities in the course of complying with the state ideology of CMIO multiracialism (defined in Chapter 5.6), the Indian negotiation of identities is made manifoldly more difficult and complex by structural and attitudinal problems within the community. The Malay ethnic group looks to refuge in Islam as a unifying factor, the Chinese in the Mandarin language, but the ‘Indian’ category in the CMIO classification has arguably no unifying factor except perhaps the notion of origins in the Indian sub-continent, a factor that is also debatable because Indians nowadays “do not automatically have India as their homeland.”<sup>5</sup> Unlike the Chinese and Malays, the Indians also possess a strong diasporic consciousness, which has particular relevance to their construction of national identification. Such a construction is made more difficult by the fact that there are serious internal contradictions within the ‘Indian’ community itself, leading to the question: “Who and what is an Indian?” An identity politics is initiated that complicates the relationship between racial politics, ethnic identity and national identity.

The chapter addresses several inter-related themes, the most important being the tracing of how the historical process of migration explored in the previous chapters is related to the emergence of an ethnic identity in the Singapore context. Resulting from this enquiry I will demonstrate that the state’s attempt to construct a homogenous Indian ethnic identity exposes the problems and tensions encountered in Singapore Indians’ struggle to identify with the nation-state’s ideology of multiracialism and national identity. In exploring the above themes, the chapter has two points of focus. First, it will in 4.2, address elements that define the individual’s identity as a member of an ethnic group and, second, in 4.3 it will look at ways in which the Indian community relates to multi-ethnic relations and the mechanism for defining group identity induced by the state’s race-based policies of social control. I

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<sup>4</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” *Public Culture* 2, 2 (1990): 17.

<sup>5</sup> Indira Arumugam, “Sociology of the Indians” in *The Making of Singapore Sociology: Society and State*, eds. Tong Chee Kiong and Lian Kwen Fee (Singapore: Times Academia Press, 2002), 325.

will explore in this chapter the various facets of the 'Indian' identity by examining the responses of the minority Indians to the state's articulation of racial politics in a bid to demonstrate how the construction of national identity affects their day to day experiences as members of a minority ethnic group saddled between the Chinese and Malay communities.

## **4.2 What is an 'Indian' in Singapore?**

As defined by the Singapore Department of Statistics, the Indian community in Singapore is referred to as: "persons of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan origin", comprising various ethno-linguistic groups and sub-ethnic groups such as the Tamils, Telugus, Malayalees, Sikhs, Punjabis, Bengalis, Gujaratis and Sinhalese.<sup>6</sup> These groups can be further divided along religious communities such as the Tamil Hindus, Christians and Muslims, and the Malayalee Hindus, Christians and Muslims. Collectively, they are referred to as 'Indians', a social category that refers to peoples and their cultural practices from the Indian sub-continent. K S Sandhu highlights that almost all major ethno-linguistic groups of the Indian sub-continent are represented in Singapore.<sup>7</sup> Despite considerable diversity within the Indian community, in both administrative usage and in the everyday life of non-Indian Singaporeans and tourists, 'Indian' is a catch-all term for all ethnic and sub-ethnic groups supposedly of South Asian origin. I will explore in this chapter how this simplistic definition of Indian identity and ethnicity is subverted by the community's own articulations.

Most Indians initially came from India and some from Malaysia in the nineteenth century, and settled in Singapore during British rule. Their social and economic lives were based on racial lines drawn by the British administration, and this situation continued till the onset of post-independence when urban renewal and resettlement schemes were introduced by the new nation state in the 1960s. With the introduction of these schemes, the racial enclaves carved out by the British administrators had to make way for integrated housing which changed the conditions

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<sup>6</sup> Department of Statistics, Singapore (2000) 16.

<sup>7</sup> Kernial Singh Sandhu "Some Aspects of Indian Settlement in Singapore, 1891-1969," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 10, 2 (1969).

of ethnic interaction.<sup>8</sup> Since more than 90% of the population now live in government subsidized Housing Board apartments<sup>9</sup>, the state employs a quota system which amalgamates a cross-cultural mix of all the races, regardless of religious or sub-ethnic associations (see Chapter 7.2: Housing Policy). Despite this changed urban living context, many Singapore Indians still identify with their village origins in the Indian subcontinent. Sub-ethnic differences and diversities are also evident in the Indian concentrations on the island. In colonial days Indians from different parts of the Indian sub-continent had concentrated mainly in five areas of the island (see Chapter 2) but, even within these Indian groupings, one type of Indian group was numerically dominant.<sup>10</sup> Even today, for example, the Little India area around Serangoon Road has more South Indian Tamil merchants, and High Street more Sikh and other North Indian traders. Indians themselves therefore were, and still are, conscious of sub-ethnic differences within what may have seemed to others a homogeneously Indian area. In fact, as compared to the other major ethnic groups in Singapore, Indians have by far the greatest variety of sub-ethnic groups.

Although most Indian migrants in the pre-independence period were citizens of India, many, my own parents for example, chose to become Singapore citizens because dual citizenship was not offered by India. The Indian government made it clear in 1953 that Indians outside India had to choose between India and their country of residence.<sup>11</sup> Indians form the smallest minority in multicultural Singapore but are given 'equal' rights with other racial groups through the state ideology of CMIO meritocracy. At present, Indians form 8% of the total population of Singapore and the majority of them are Singapore-born. Unlike early Indian migrants, direct economic and political contact with India has been diminishing and fewer Indians now return to India to settle there.<sup>12</sup> The Indian population in Singapore is therefore clearly

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<sup>8</sup> In contemporary Singapore words like 'race' and 'ethnicity' are used interchangeably in daily usage, though "race" is preferred both by political leaders and the population at large. These terms are discussed in depth in Chapter 5.

<sup>9</sup> Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

<sup>10</sup> Sharon Siddique and Nirmala Purushotam, *Singapore's Little India: Past, Present and Future* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Kernial Singh Sandhu, "Indian Immigration and Settlement in Singapore", in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, eds. K S Sandhu and A Mani (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Sandhu, "Indian Immigration and Settlement in Singapore".

becoming more stabilized and less transient than it once was. A comparison of the percentage of locally born Singaporean Indians with those born elsewhere (the vast majority in India and Pakistan) is illuminating, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2.

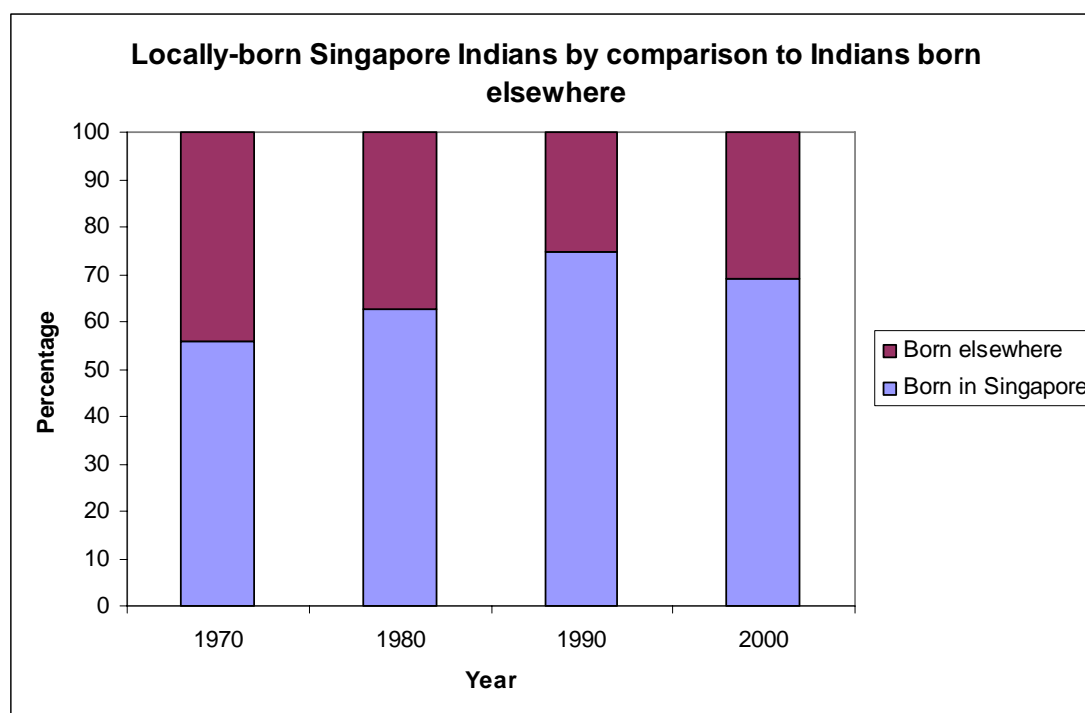
Locally-born Singapore Indians by comparison to Indians born elsewhere.

(Numbers and percentage)

	1970	Per cent	1980	Per cent	1990	Per cent	2000	Per cent
Locally-born Singapore Indians	81,126	55.9	96,665	62.5	142,678	74.7	165,833	69.1
Indians born Elsewhere	64,043	44.1	57,967	37.5	48,229	25.3	74,270	30.9
Total Resident Indian Population	145,169	100	154,632	100	190,907	100	240,103	100

Note: The resident population comprises Singapore citizens and non-citizens.

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.



As for the increase in the general population of Singapore from 1990 to 2000, the Census of Population 2000 reports that “the growth of population during 1990-2000 was the fastest in the post-independence era. This was mainly due to the inflows of permanent residents and foreign workers... the population in 2000 had grown by an average annual rate of 2.8% [whereas] the rate of growth in the 1970s and the 1980s was 1.5% and 2.4% per annum, respectively”. The census also reports that the number of Indians who were non-citizens in 1970 was 32,486 whereas it dropped to 25,663 in 1980 and increased to 53,800 in 1990. These figures indicate that most of the non-citizen Indians comprised foreign workers who by the terms of their contract were not eligible for Singapore citizenship anyway. On the other hand, most of the permanent residents decided to avail of the opportunity of Singapore citizenship. The above figures bear out the point that the Indians in Singapore are beginning to identify more closely with the Republic and less with their natal homelands in South Asia. These figures are augmented by data showing that the Indian citizen population has increased substantially over the decades, as Table 2A below shows.

Table 2A

Indian citizen and non-citizen population in Singapore.

	1970	1980	1990
Citizens	112,683	128,969	175,700
Non-citizens	32,486	25,663	53,800

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

The department was not able to provide data for 2000, but extrapolating the above figures it can be surmised that there has been a sizeable increase in the numbers of Singapore Indian citizens since 1990. While, of course, possession of Singapore citizenship does not necessarily signify a commitment to the nation, it does clearly indicate a much greater physical, economic and emotional attachment to Singapore than in times past.

Another contributory factor was that after gaining independence in 1965, Singapore officially recognized the Indians as one of the three official racial groups, along with the Chinese and Malays. Accordingly, since the vast majority of the Indian population in Singapore comprised Tamils from South India, Tamil was



declared one of the island's official languages, along with English, Malay and Mandarin. Tamil appears on the Singapore currency, postage stamps, official documents, street signs in Little India and in many public notices throughout the Republic. Furthermore Tamil is officially designated the 'mother-tongue' of the Indian community, meaning that Tamil is supposed to represent the Indian population. At the 2000 census, 64% of all Indians in Singapore listed Tamil as their mother tongue and Tamil is the only Indian language offered for instruction in Singapore schools.<sup>13</sup> South Indians in turn form 80% of the total Indian population in Singapore and are therefore the most prominent. Among the North Indians, Punjabis form the majority and speak the Punjabi language. Numerous regional languages are spoken by Indians coming from different parts of India.

Apart from linguistic diversity, the Indian community in Singapore is also heterogeneous in terms of religious and cultural practices, although in official discourse they are seen as a homogeneous group. The religious categories for Indians are, at best, very broad ones and it is important to acknowledge that Indians themselves would in some contexts identify themselves as belonging to more specific sects or denominations of a particular grouping. The broad category of Hinduism, on which much of the scholarship has been focused, encompasses a 56.5% majority of Singapore Indians. While there is an underlying unity of ideas among the Hindus, there are numerous sub-groups who have a different emphasis when it comes to worship and social relations. Examples of such sub-groups include Sai Baba devotees, Krishna devotees, members of the Shiva family, and some other modern Hindu movements. Sometimes members belonging to different sects can be found within the same family - such is the diversity among the Indian community.

There are also different approaches to religious practice and interpretation of Hindu ideas. Some of the different religious orientations among Singaporean Hindus correspond to regional and linguistic differences. Interestingly, I found that there were indeed distinct differences in North and South Indian approaches to Hinduism both in everyday life and in formally articulated aspects of worship. Most Tamil-speaking Indians in Singapore are Hindu by religion; yet it must be remembered that there are also other Indian Hindus whose mother-tongue is one of many regional North and South Indian languages like Malayalam, Telugu, Hindi, Kannada, Marathi,

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<sup>13</sup> Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

Sindhi, Kashmiri, Gujarati, Bengali and many other dialects like Bhojpuri and Rajasthani. Although they are all Singaporean Hindus, there are significant religious differences among them, according to whether their own or ancestral background is in North or South India. This North-South divide extends to the domain of domestic rituals, religious traditions and customs that are jealously cherished and observed, both privately in homes and publicly as in temple worship. As American anthropologist Lawrence Babb notes:

Of the thirty-odd important Hindu temples in Singapore, two are North Indian. They are constructed in the Northern style, are served by North Indian priests, and are supported and patronized exclusively by the North Indian community. The remaining temples are South Indian in design and iconographic style. They employ South Indian priests, and are supported and patronized by Southerners ... In general, the two communities have maintained separate religious institutions, separate festival calendars, separate priesthoods, and separate traditions of ceremonial style.<sup>14</sup>

Babb maintains that what divides North and South Indians is linguistic difference in religious matters, since the two communities generally cannot communicate with each other in any Indian language. There is, however, some measure of religious interaction between Northerners and Southerners and this is in the region of mediums and neo-Hindu movements, both of which use the vehicle of English mainly to attract devotees. While mediums or *Swamiji*s, who normally come from India, attract both the rich and poor, educated and uneducated, North and South Indians, neo-Hindu movements attract English-educated Hindus and hence are more class-based. Such reformist movements place greater emphasis on emotional attachment to a guru and are deritualised unlike traditional Hindu worship. Examples of the prominent movements currently operating in Singapore are the Sathya Sai Baba Movement, Transcendental Meditation, Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga Movement, International Society for Krsna Consciousness (ISKON), The Shiva Family, Sri Ramakrishna Mission, Sri Narayana Mission, and Krishna Our Guide.

Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism are the other religious traditions practised by Indians in Singapore. Their significance in the Singapore ethnic context can be seen

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<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Babb, "Patterns of Hinduism" in *Singapore: Society in Transition*, ed. Riaz Hassan (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), 190-91.

by the fact that together they attract about 42% of the total Indian population in Singapore, and hence some understanding of their presence is important. Originally coming from India as traders, Singapore's Indian-Muslims, who constitute 21.8% and form the second largest religious group among Singapore Indians, are sub-divided into different dialect-regional groups and sects. These include various Tamil and Malayalee groups, Dawoodi Bohras and Khojas.<sup>15</sup> The Indian-Muslims are a fragmented community in a manner similar to the Hindus. Fragmented by linguistic and various Islamic denominations, notably the Sunni and Shia, Singapore's Indian-Muslims pray at mosques associated with their respective congregations, many also identifying with the local Malay Muslim population. The assumption of fixed and rigid boundaries in the essentialist categorisation of CMIO racial identities and the successful internalization of this classification in Singapore has resulted in the ambiguous identity of the sub-ethnic Singapore Indian-Muslim 'community'.<sup>16</sup> Indian-Muslims form a population of 66,000, or 25.6% of the total Indian population of 257,800, according to the population census of 2000. These statistics, however, do not differentiate between country of origin, linguistic affiliations and sub-ethnic affiliations.

The national ideology that assumes Muslims to be Malays and Hindus to be Indians becomes dominant in the minds of people and in images featuring multicultural Singapore. Hence the Indian-Muslims are thrust uncomfortably into a position of contested identities.<sup>17</sup> The hyphenated identity joining two processes of Indianness and Muslimness into a single racial entity becomes problematic and contested as it embodies multiple identities whose interaction creates new complexities. Indian-Muslims in Singapore consequently embody a historically changing and contested set of multiple identities that contradict essentialist state notions of a homogeneous, unified and fixed racial identity. In the first place, the

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<sup>15</sup> Dawoodi Bohras and Khojas are Shi'a Muslims from North India. The Dawoodi Bohras trace their spiritual leader to Yemen while the Khojas say they were converted to Islam by a Persian. In Singapore there are about 500 Dawoodi Bohras and 80 Khojas (Heritage Society Workshop, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Joel S Kahn, "Southeast Asian Identities: Introduction" in *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand*, ed. J Kahn (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), 1-27.

<sup>17</sup> Nooraisha binte Mohamed Ibrahim, *The Contested Identities of Singapore's Indian-Muslim 'Community'* (Academic Exercise: Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, 2002/2003).

identity of the Indian-Muslim community in Singapore is strongly influenced by the domineering presence of the overwhelming 90% Malay-Muslim community who speak Malay. The second influential factor is the dominant presence of Hindu Indians, the majority of whom in Singapore speak Tamil and come from the Indian subcontinent, while there are also others who speak Hindi, Urdu, Malayalam and other Indian languages. Between this equation, there are multiple affiliations and positions as both men and women tend to be either more Malay or more Indian as the situation demands. Their similarities with the Malays with respect to religion and their ethnic similarities with the Indians allow them to be among both communities, making them insiders and 'other' simultaneously. These powerful influences impinge on the identity of the Indian-Muslims as they struggle to form an ethnic community in the national production of identity. As a Muslim respondent says:

Because we are a minority within a minority we can't expect to be known very well. The immediate image of the people in Singapore would be Chinese, Malay and Indian. To them it doesn't matter what type of Indian you are. But for us it is important because that is who we are.<sup>18</sup>

The presence of the multiple sub-ethnic groups within the Indian-Muslim community makes the Indian-Muslims here a highly fragmented group. While at one extreme one group of Malay-speaking Indian-Muslims are assimilated into the Malay-Muslim community, at the other end of the spectrum are the Tamil-speaking Indian-Muslims who are assimilated into the larger community of Tamil-speaking Indians.<sup>19</sup>

Indian Christianity in Singapore is even more diverse than Indian Islam: Some Indians are members of Protestant denominations where they either form minorities within the largely Chinese congregations, or in some cases they have separated themselves, usually in order to be able to use an Indian language or languages as the medium of communication and worship (eg. The Tamil Methodist Church). Many are members of the Roman Catholic Church, which has a far higher percentage of Indian members than the Protestant denominations (with the exception of the Methodists), and others are members of the virtually exclusive Indian Syrian Orthodox and Mar

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<sup>18</sup> As told to Nooraisha binte Mohamed Ibrahim in *The Contested Identities of Singapore's Indian-Muslim 'Community'*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Noorul Farha As'art, *Crafting Selves: The Case of Indian-Muslims in Singapore* (National University of Singapore, 2000).

Thoma Churches.<sup>20</sup> Among the 12.4% Indian Christians there are Catholics, Syrian Christians, Anglicans, Methodists, Pentecostal and those belonging to other denominations.<sup>21</sup> Sub-group differences among these denominations and groups also exist. A case in point would be that Malayalee Syrian Catholics would, when it comes to the question of arranging a marriage, differentiate themselves from other Malayalees including Mar Thomite and Jacobite Syrian Christians, and from other Catholic Indians.

Singapore Sikhs, numbering about 12,000 according to the 2000 Census Report, share a common linguistic and historical heritage in the Punjab (now divided between India and Pakistan), yet have several internal divisions in Singapore. The politics of identity equally applies to the Sikh community in Singapore. According to Dusenbery, unlike the other Indian communities, the Sikhs in Singapore have in recent years come to be regarded as something of a model minority community, praised at the highest levels of government for contributing effectively to the “well being and stability of Singapore ... more than in proportion to [its] numbers”, and therefore rewarded with promises of state support while still preserving its distinctiveness.<sup>22</sup> That the Sikhs as a distinct community have gained official recognition and support has largely been because they successfully made out a case for recognition and reinforcement of their distinctive Punjabi/Sikh heritage by reconciling it with the nationalist agenda. Given institutional efforts since the 1970s to nurture an inclusive Singapore Indian identity (although largely Tamil and Hindu in content) this has been achieved by the Sikh’s explicit repudiation of politicized religion (including a crackdown on Singaporean Sikh supporters of an independent Sikh state of Khalistan in India in the mid-1980s).

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<sup>20</sup> John Clammer, *The Sociology of Singapore Religion: Studies in Christianity and Chinese Culture* (Singapore: Chopmen Publishers, 1991), 102.

<sup>21</sup> Syrian Christians who came from Kerala in India claim to have been converted to Christianity by Thomas, one of Jesus’ 12 disciples in the first few years of the Christian era. The Syrian Christians are divided into a few denominations like Catholics, Jacobites and Mar Thomites based on different ecclesiastical allegiance.

<sup>22</sup> Verne Dusenbery, “The Poetics and Politics of Recognition: Diasporan Sikhs in Pluralist Politics,” *American Ethnologist* 24, 4 (1997): 738-762; Comments made by then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, shortly before his retirement to the position of Senior Minister. Similar comments were also made subsequently by then acting Minister of Information and the Arts, B G Yeo (*The Straits Times*, 1990) as well as by former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (*The Straits Times*, 1991).

Unhappy with being forced to study Tamil (one of the designated second languages) in schools as it did not contribute to Sikh culture, Sikhs lobbied the government for a change in language policy. Their main concern was to combat “the negative influences of Western culture” and “the erosion of traditional Asian (Sikh) values among the Sikh youth.”<sup>23</sup> The government, acknowledging the concerns of the Sikhs, consequently allowed Sikh studies to be incorporated in the school religious studies programme and the Punjabi language as an examination subject both at primary and secondary levels. Such efforts to advance the interests of the community in tandem with the nationalist project and efforts to work in line with government welfare initiatives earned the praise of the government, leading the Prime Minister to laud their contributions to society as befitting a “distinctive group” who “had been a credit to Singapore because by and large, they were law-abiding, hardworking and successful in educating their children to enter the professions and business”.<sup>24</sup> During a visit to the Central Sikh Temple in November 1990, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew complimented the Sikhs for their “realistic appreciation of Singapore’s realities”.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, the Sikh has been recognized as a distinct social identity by the state – Sikh is now listed as a separate ‘race’ as well as a separate ‘religion’, a change also reflected in the latest census category. Among all the subethnic divisions of Singapore’s Indian population and indeed of all the ethnic groups of Singapore, the Sikhs are probably the most visible, their men bearded and colourfully turbaned as well as sporting other symbols of their religion, and the womenfolk wearing *salwar kameez* (long tops, scarfs and pyjama pants). Identifying Sikh values that will provide a cultural anchor and harmonise with the ideology of a Singaporean identity as articulated by the state, the Sikhs have successfully blended the politics of national ideology and multiculturalism for the benefit of themselves and the society at large. The state in turn has used its recognition of Sikh distinctiveness to successfully demonstrate its management of ethnicity and religion of the Sikh community and the

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<sup>23</sup> These issues are drawn from a letter of 2 November 1990 (“Tribute from the Sikh Community”) from Bhajan Singh, Chairman of the Sikh Advisory Board, to Lee Kuan Yew, then Prime Minister of Singapore.

<sup>24</sup> *The Straits Times*, 1990.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

successful reconciliation of nationalist and multicultural discourses by this community.<sup>26</sup>

The Malayalees are another prominent sub-ethnic group in Singapore. Originally hailing from the Malabar Coast in the South Indian state of Kerala, they too, like the Tamils, lived in ethnic enclaves in colonial Singapore. The largest was in Sembawang near the British Naval Base and in various British Royal Air Force bases at Changi, Seletar and Tengah, as most of the Malayalees worked for the former British administration. Even though they lived in close proximity, they were not a homogeneous group, as they comprised Hindus, Muslims, Syrian Christians, Roman Catholics and other Christian denominations who were varied in their social, cultural and religious practices and organizations. According to many Singaporean Malayalees I interviewed their biggest ‘problem’ is the inability of their respective organizations to effectively work together as a collective entity. Because of the state’s language policy, Malayalee youths have little interest in such organizations or their activities as many are not competent in the language and therefore are unable to appreciate or participate in Malayalee cultural activities. Unlike these local Malayalees, recent Malayalee migrants from India maintain their strong Malayalee cultural traditions and tend to perceive the local Malayalees as being culturally inferior because many either do not speak the language or observe Malayalee traditions. Hence, language, religion and economic cleavages within the local Malayalee community are exacerbated by their relationship with new arrivals from India and complicate the problem of identities.

Most Malayalee children grow up competent in English, many choosing Malay or Tamil as their second language requirement in schools instead of Malayalam (not offered). The dearth of marriage partners, especially girls, from within the community, compels many modern Malayalee boys to marry out of the community. In such cross-cultural marriages, they find Malayalee social organizations less meaningful, preferring non-ethnic based social organizations instead. Thirdly, a sizeable number of Malayalee boys are educated overseas. Many also migrate abroad. Moreover, intra-ethnic contact is minimal with interaction mainly confined to youngsters in the community. All in all, there is no motivation for younger Malayalees to preserve their culture in the form re-invented by their parents and

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<sup>26</sup> Dusenbery, “The Poetics and Politics of Recognition”.

grandparents. There is also, among the younger Malayalees, a conscious movement away from ethnic identification and towards a more liberal and neutral identification especially in Chinese-dominated Singapore in which racial stereotypes and prejudice towards minority communities by the dominant Chinese prevail.

Caste identification also plays a significant part in the social life of the Indian in Singapore. Although their presence has been diluted in the urban cosmopolitan world of modern Singapore, caste divisions still exert strong pressure on the social life of Indians in Singapore, although it must be borne in mind that Indians in Singapore have to conform to a society in which full ritual observance and pollution practices cannot conveniently be observed. The state for example has never allocated housing to Indians on the basis of caste or *jati*. Yet caste as an institution has reinvented itself and caste identities continue in the Singapore setting in different forms and ways. It is highly probable that it has been effectively and subtly supplemented by division according to social class – the ranking stratification tool of modern society which demarcates social status according to economic, employment, and educational status.

Caste was associated with migration from the very start. Economic survival and social emancipation from the evils of the caste system propelled outward migration of the lower caste poor, unemployed, and landless Indian labourers, to whom crossing the dark seas, the *kalapani*, was not considered polluting.<sup>27</sup> The system was rigidly maintained in the early migrant periods through occupational specialization, residential separation, restrictions on temple entry and participation in Hindu rituals. According to A Mani, the distance between caste Hindus and untouchables (the class that was largely employed as coolies in the British administration) was maintained in the occupations they performed, and in the residences, roads and temples of 'Little India'.<sup>28</sup> Although this social-spatial separation has been moderated in modern Singapore, it is still visible to the discerning Indian eye, especially in the area of occupations, marriages and caste-based organizations. For instance, it is unimaginable for a Brahmin to work as a road

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<sup>27</sup> Vijay Mishra, "(B)ordering Naipaul: Indenture History and Diasporic Poetics," *Diaspora*, 5, 2 (1996): 195.

<sup>28</sup> A Mani, *The Changing Caste-Structure amongst Singapore Indians* (Singapore: University of Singapore, 1977).



sweeper in contemporary Singapore society just as it was during the colonial period.<sup>29</sup> Caste-based organisations take the form of voluntary associations and are normally prevalent among the upper-caste Hindus, particularly the Brahmins, decreasing with the level of the social hierarchy of the Hindus.

As a 'reinvented' tradition, caste manifestations are also present among Singapore's Indian-Muslims, Christians and Sikhs, though to a lesser degree than with upper-caste Hindus. While the Sikh caste, for example, extols identities and values, it is not an uncommon sight to see Sikhs marrying non-Sikhs. Christians generally marry within their denominations, though this is not always the case. Indian-Muslims, on the other hand, appear more rigid when it comes to marriage, insisting on alliances within the community, as I observed when interviewing this community group.

Singapore Indians also use other criteria in defining themselves and differentiating themselves from other kinds of Indians, including physical appearance, dress, regionality, dialect, class, occupation and religion. Non-Indian Singaporeans are generally vague when it comes to differentiating one type of 'Indian' from another. Some differentiate North Indians from Tamils on the basis that the latter are generally "very dark". For many Northerners, South Indians are all "Tamil" and/or "mamaks". The rest are "Sindhi", "Bengali", or "Gujarati". "Bengali" is commonly used as a generic term for all North Indians, the derogatory term "Bangali tongchet" more specifically referring to Sikhs with turbans.<sup>30</sup> A Bengali from Bengal among my informants often has great difficulty explaining to non-Indian friends that he is not Sikh. Indian sub-ethnic differences are thus both visible and blurred to non-Indian Singaporeans. Some non-Indian Singaporeans, I observed during my interviews, are not even able to comprehend the complexity of sub-ethnic differences among the Indians. There were several occasions when I was asked (mainly by Chinese respondents) whether I was Muslim, Hindu or Christian, even though my name is clearly that of a Tamil Hindu.

These examples illustrate how complicated the social identities of Singapore Indians are to deconstruct, though in many areas of everyday life these identities do

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<sup>29</sup> In domestic situations however higher caste Hindus are compelled by Singapore realities to take on chores previously performed by lower caste Indians or by those of other ethnicities.

<sup>30</sup> Siddique and Purushotam, *Singapore's Little India*, 8.

not come into play, especially when interactions with the anonymity of urban modern spaces are involved. The social divisiveness of the Indians in Singapore has also extended to their public political life right from the earliest colonial times. Historian Sandhu claims that unlike the Chinese, the Indians were not united enough to have any *one* Indian official appointed to take charge of *all* the Indians living there.<sup>31</sup> His findings are echoed by another historian, Mary Turnbull, who argues that the Indian community made no impact on society and lacked leadership or strong local organizations.<sup>32</sup>

Consequently, the Indians were poorly represented in the colonial administration. Until 1923, they did not have a single representative on the executive council and had only one on the legislative council.<sup>33</sup> The Singapore Indian Association was founded in 1923 for social and recreational purposes and the Indian Chamber of Commerce in 1937 for trade purposes, but more extensive participation in the political affairs of Singapore came only in the wake of the Second World War and with the success of the nationalist movement and independence in India. Close proximity to India and strong emotional, religious, linguistic and political ties to their respective regions of origin encouraged Indians to go their different ways.<sup>34</sup>

Last but not least, to compound the situation even further, the Indian sub-ethnic groups became torn apart over the issue of their respective mother-tongue languages. From the 1950s, the Indian community became fragmented and diversified along linguistic leanings, with the Tamils, Malayalees, and Punjabis (comprising the main Indian communities in Singapore) politicized over the issue. This trend was accentuated by urban renewal, education policies, language policies, meritocracy, secularism and economic prosperity in independent Singapore, according to Sandhu.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 225.

<sup>32</sup> Constance Mary Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819-75* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977), 52-53, 98-99.

<sup>33</sup> George Netto, *Indians in Malaya: Historical Facts and Figures* (Singapore, 1961), 59.

<sup>34</sup> A Mani, "Indians in Singapore Society", in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, eds. K S Sandhu and A Mani (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 795-796.

<sup>35</sup> Sandhu, "Indian Immigration and Settlement in Singapore", 786-787.

Although my research shows that the new generation of young Indians identify strongly with Singapore as compared to their country of ethnic origin, it also reveals that in certain contexts, such as marriage, relations with other ethnic groups and their reaction to the state-sponsored CMIO ideology of multiethnicity, they acutely feel that their ethnicity makes them a minority. My field interviews suggest that this consciousness of being a minority group is intensified by the Republic's policy of encouraging the preservation and strengthening of ethnic, cultural and linguistic roots, and by the knowledge that they are further fragmented by regionality, dialect, language, caste, class and religion. They also differ greatly in their socio-economic and educational levels as Tables 15 (Chapter 6.3) and 18-22 (Chapter 8.2) show.

Structural weaknesses and lack of cohesion within each of the Indian communities' social organizations leave these communities divided and fragmented, thereby preventing them from progressing in terms of socio-economic development and responding positively to issues (for example, educational and occupational improvement) confronting Indians as a whole in the context of the wider multiethnic society of Singapore. Despite several generations of Singapore-born Indians, the ethnic group still stands divided along ethnic, religious, linguistic and social class lines. Consequently this plurality of interests and identities does not make it possible to speak of a distinct Singapore Indian community as such within the context of Singapore's political, social and economic environment. In the words of Sandhu, "it is unlikely that the Indians will ever, at least not in the foreseeable future, again play a significant political role in the island as a *community* or a communal force".<sup>36</sup>

### **4.3 'Indian' identity in Singapore**

Of particular relevance in the analysis of the Indian presence in the broader polyethnic and globalised Singaporean society is how the community manages the negotiation of identities. This problem is accentuated by new arrivals of professional elites and manual labourers who have been increasingly occupying the social spaces of the local Indian community in the last two decades or so. The recruitment of such foreign talent has a strong 'racial' dimension as I will demonstrate in this section, thereby giving emphasis to the argument that 'race' is a social/political construct in

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<sup>36</sup> Sandhu, "Indian Immigration and Settlement in Singapore", 786-787.

Singapore. Indian ethnic identity is further problematised by the reinforcement of racial identities by the nation state. Additionally, the negotiation of identities has created a situation of diasporic consciousness among the Indians in Singapore, particularly since the 1980s when the promotion of ethnicity through the state's 'Asian Values' policy gained momentum and overshadowed the pursuit of a single national identity.<sup>37</sup> More recent changes in state ideologies, policies, and practices of nation building and "ethnic management" in the corporatist globalised city-state over the years had brought into sharp focus the relevance of diasporic consciousness through the migration experience. The problem has become complicated for the local Indians since the 1990s with the influx of new waves of professional and manual Indian migrant workers (see Table 2 in 4.2) whose particular identities add new dimensions to the construction of ethnic identity. Such a negotiation of identities has long been an issue for Indian migrants as well as for local Indians in Singapore.

The experiences of migrants are always constructed within specific national spaces. Consequently, the ideology of the nation has implications for how they experience their relocation and identities. Similarly the migrants' experience reflects on the ideology of the nation. Various studies have been made about the connections between national ideology and migration with regard to Asians living in multicultural societies such as the USA, Canada and Australia. Hage, for instance, argues that 'multiculturalists' within Australia fantasize a 'white nation' governed by a dominant white majority (a view popularized by Pauline Hanson), with such a fantasy impacting upon migrants' sense of belonging.<sup>38</sup> Asian migrants, in this context, will always be seen as 'outsiders', as they will never fit into the national imagination of what constitutes an 'Australian'. These polarizations prevail in the national imagination of many countries even though those nations identify themselves as multicultural.

Singapore's concept of multiculturalism, however, is different from most settler colonial societies because Singapore endorsed a policy of multiculturalism not only from the day it was conceived as a nation but also during the colonial era, although the approach to multiculturalism and the way it has been practised has been

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<sup>37</sup> Whilst ostensibly multicultural, the Asian Values policy as an integral part of social engineering sought to inculcate the values of the majority community to Singaporeans as a whole.

<sup>38</sup> G Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Annadale and West Wickham: Pluto Press, 1998).

differently emphasized during these two periods. Uncovering how multiculturalism has shaped and still continues to shape transmigratory experience in Singapore is crucial to understanding the context of Indian diaspora in the globalised nation state of Singapore. Most studies of the Indian diaspora in Singapore study migration as a phenomenon of the past, confining it to the migration of convict, construction and plantation labour of the colonial period. These studies fail to recognize that many local Indians are emigrating, while many overseas Indians (not only from India but also from other countries) are immigrating. Another failing of these studies is their emphasis on the homogeneity of race and ethnic identification, signifying a perspective of colonial management strategies.<sup>39</sup> The Indian community during the colonial period was therefore assumed to be fixed and static. Such an essentialised notion portrayed the Indians as temporary economic migrants who owed economic, emotional and physical attachment and true allegiance to India without making any attempt to integrate into the mainstream of Singaporean society. Indians migrating after the Second World War, have been considered, in these writings, to have permanently settled and developed roots in Singapore. These writings ignore contemporary themes of globalization, transnationalism, mobility of labour and the relevance of diasporic consciousness and social realities of Indians in Singapore.

Diaspora is a term whose definition has been expanded to designate virtually any population considered “deterritorialised” or “transnational” – any gathering of individuals currently residing in a country other than from which they (or their ancestors) originated. The term was originally intended to describe and encapsulate the historical experiences and predicament of Jews forcibly displaced from their homes and yearning to return to their homeland to end their diasporic existence. In recent times, however, the application of this term has been evoked and extended to represent other geographically dispersed groups all over the world.

Safran’s definition of diaspora relies heavily on the Jewish diaspora, while James Clifford conceptualizes diaspora as the “modern, transnational and intercultural experience”.<sup>40</sup> Basch, one of the most influential writers in the study of international migration from a transnational perspective, defines transnationalism as “the processes

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<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of race and ethnic identification see Chapter 5.

<sup>40</sup> William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora* 1, 1 (1991): 83-99; Clifford, “Travelling Cultures” and “Diasporas”, 266.

by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement”.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, transmigrants are understood as developing and maintaining multiple familial, economic, social, organizational, religious and political relationships within and across borders. They do not sever ties with their homeland and assimilate into new ways of life in their new settlements. Instead, transmigrants are seen as actively maintaining relations across national borders. Diaspora or diasporic communities are described by Dwyer as dispersed communities who share multiple belongings to different places or ‘homes’ in different “national spaces”.<sup>42</sup> Robin Cohen, on the other hand, advances a definition that encompasses trade, imperial, cultural and labour diasporas.<sup>43</sup> Various other writers including Stuart Hall, Tololyan, Gilroy, Radhakrishnan, Ang and Mishra have described this term in various ways, while literary writers like V S Naipaul and Salman Rushdie have problematised it in their novels.<sup>44</sup> In my opinion, only Mishra adequately encapsulates the predicament of the Indian diaspora in Singapore because of the unique nature of the Singapore ‘Indians’ who have to contend with the social production of racial and ethnic identities and the social realities of living in Singapore. They have also to grapple with the construction of national ideology and state management of ethnicity through the CMIO label, their relationships with other ethnicities, the heavy impact of global capitalism, transnational cultural flows, the migration experience and the historical baggage attached to it as well as the political history of Singapore both during colonial and postcolonial times. More importantly, the new forms of class and caste distinction connected to the migration of recent

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<sup>41</sup> L Schiller Basch and C S Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialised Nation States* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1994), 7.

<sup>42</sup> C Dwyer, “Migrations and Diasporas” in *Introducing Human Geographies*, eds. P Cloke, P Crang and M Goodwin (London: Arnold, 1999), 291.

<sup>43</sup> Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: University College London, 1997).

<sup>44</sup> Stuart Hall, “Negotiating Caribbean Identities”, in *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology*, ed. Gregory Castle (Oxford, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 280-292; Kachig Tololyan, “The Nation-State and Its Others : In Lieu of a Preface,” *Diaspora* 1, 1 (1991): 3-7; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); R Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Locations* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1996); Ien Ang, *Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (London: Routledge, 2001); Vijay Mishra, “The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora,” *Textual Practice* 10, 3 (1996): 421-447. In this work he compares the ‘exclusivist’ diaspora of Naipaul with the ‘border’ diaspora represented by Rushdie; Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*.

waves of guest migrant workers from the Indian sub-continent, particularly white-collar skilled professionals and blue-collar unskilled construction workers/domestic servants in the last two decades or so, have thrust the Indian diaspora in Singapore into a very highly contested domain. Mishra's work appears to be able to encompass the contemporary diaspora of the Indian in Singapore where "the old diaspora of exclusivism" (meaning already localized Singapore Indians who no longer regard India as their home like V S Naipaul) is set against the "new diaspora of the border" (highly mobile ethnic Indian transnationals who include both the skilled, talented white-collar expatriates like Salman Rushdie and the comparatively unskilled blue-collar foreign construction workers/domestic servants).<sup>45</sup> The presence of these newer arrivals of various groups of Indians has generated new forms of racial politics.

The Singapore state has been actively encouraging the inflow of temporary 'foreign workers' and 'foreign talent' from abroad since the late 1980s. However, the flow of foreign nationals is a highly selective process. Indian professional talent is readily desired by the state and given 'red-carpet treatment' (for example, encouraged to take up Permanent Residence) while construction workers and domestic maids are merely tolerated and subjected to a 'use-and-discard' policy. What is significant in the selection of foreign nationals is the concentration on recruiting professional talent from Asia that is able to fit into CMIO ideology. The state imagines foreign talent from Asia as adapting to Singaporean society easily because:

Singapore offer[s] an Asian society with a higher standard of living and a quality of life than their own countries and they [can] easily assimilate into our society.<sup>46</sup>

The rationale was that Indian talent shared similar values with Singaporean Indians. The recruitment of Indian talent since the late 1980s has been so successful that the number of these migrants has increased substantially (see Table 2 in 4.2). The CMIO ideology however both regulates the lives of Singapore citizens and the flow of foreign talent into the country on the basis of a class dimension. It has implications for how the migrants experience their relocation in the new context of Singapore's ethnic and national identities.

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<sup>45</sup> Mishra, "The Diasporic Imaginary".

<sup>46</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First, The Singapore Story: 1965-2000* (Singapore: Times Publishing Group, 2000), 166.

A key question is whether these migrants, having themselves been subjected to nation state building of postcolonial Indian nationalism, can easily fit into Singapore and gain acceptance in the local community merely because they fit neatly into CMIO ideology. Hage's concept of 'official' citizenship and 'practical' national belonging is a useful distinction in considering this issue.<sup>47</sup> He argues that official citizenship refers to an institutional-political acceptance by the state. Practical national belonging, on the other hand, refers to acceptance or non-acceptance as a subject of belonging at a communal, everyday level.<sup>48</sup> Indian professional talent has gained acceptance in Singapore society at an institutional-political level because they fit the 'racial' classification. But what needs to be considered is whether they have gained a sense of 'practical national belonging' based on racial affinity alone, as the degree of acceptance they find in the general Singaporean community affects their experience of living and working in Singapore. Occupying the same category as localized Singapore Indians under the CMIO classification has different implications that affect not only the new migrants, but more importantly the local Singapore Indians. My fieldwork shows (see later this chapter) that many local Indians do not readily see them as assimilating into Singapore society – a factor that questions the logic of CMIO ideology by adding another layer of complexity to an already diverse 'Indian' category. This is because despite the different origins, historical experiences, and the time periods within which they arrived in Singapore, migrants from the Indian subcontinent have all been classified as 'Indians' under CMIO ideology and practice. In official discourse and in reports such as the population census since colonial days, Indians are portrayed as a homogenous group rather than as plural and differentiated. At the same time language, religious and cultural practices place them in common physical spaces such as temples and cultural events. This further serves to 'naturalise' their Indian ethnic identity, but problematises the manner in which ethnicity is articulated in relation to national identity in Singapore.

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<sup>47</sup> G Hage, *White Nation*.

<sup>48</sup> A Carruthers, "The Accumulation of National Belonging in Transnational Fields: Ways of being at Home in Vietnam," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 9, 4 (2002).



This dilemma of the ‘diasporic encounter’ has enormous implications for an understanding of the Indian diaspora.<sup>49</sup> To understand the resultant racial politics arising from the state management of multiethnicity, I will now explore Indian foreign workers and Indian talent in more depth.

#### **4.4 Indian foreign workers**

Indian foreign workers are one of the many groups of workers who have been recruited to fill the shortage of people required in the construction industry and in other manual jobs like domestic help. The term ‘foreign worker’ is used for those who are employed in bluecollar jobs such as construction and domestic help. This group is often paid comparatively lower wages and is seen as ‘unskilled’ or ‘semi-skilled’ by the state and in popular discourse. They are regarded by the state as a transient workforce within the Singapore economy. Stringent legislation such as monthly levies is put in place to restrict their numbers and to ensure their short term migrant status. Various other conditions ensure that they do not become a social liability to the state. They are given work permits that last for two years, after which they are expected to return to their homeland. In short, ‘foreign workers’ are tolerated as temporary labour because they work in jobs Singaporeans no longer find attractive or viable.

Foreign workers are subjected to a regime of strict legal controls and policies that make it impossible for them to acquire a degree of permanence in Singapore. They earn less than \$1,500 per month under a work permit scheme that prohibits them from contributing to a state savings scheme called the Central Provident Fund (CPF). This way the government ensures that they will not be eligible for government housing, education or other welfare benefits that are lavished on Indian professional expatriates who come under the category of ‘Indian talent’. Work permit holders are also prevented from bringing their families to Singapore or from marrying or even having relationships with Singaporeans. They need to apply to the Ministry of Labour if they plan to marry a Singaporean – something not required of expatriate employment pass holders. Marrying without obtaining permission brings about immediate cancellation of the foreigner’s work permit, deportation and a permanent ban on re-entry to Singapore. Overstaying in Singapore is an offence punishable by

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<sup>49</sup> Brenda Yeoh, *Contesting Space: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore* (Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

canning and deportation.<sup>50</sup> Government policing also extends beyond questions of marriage to the sex lives of the women foreign workers – the domestic maids who make up about 140,000 or 30% of the foreign labour force. A female work permit holder is required by law to undergo a pregnancy test once every six months. If she is found pregnant, she is summarily repatriated and the employer forfeits the monetary bond of \$5,000 taken out on her.

The consensus among my respondents is that the labour and immigration policy relating to the foreign workforce is ‘racially’, class and gender biased, discriminating between foreign workers (comprising mainly construction workers and domestic maids) and other categories of skilled foreign talent. The harsh treatment of foreign workers is brought out in the case of a Filipino maid who was found guilty and hanged in 1995 for the murder of another maid and the 3 year-old son of her employer. There was also the case of a Thai construction worker, Somaid Kamjan, who was sentenced to a 3-month jail term and 3 lashes of the cane for overstaying.

There are also various levels of discriminatory treatment of these foreign workers. For instance, there is a sizeable difference in the wages provided to domestic maids. While Filipino maids are paid between \$300-400 per month, Indonesian and Sri Lankan maids are paid an average of \$230-250 per month and maids from India only about \$200 or lesser per month. Such a payment disparity has generated criticism that the wage is set according to race. Added to this criticism is the culture of maid abuse that has come under severe public scrutiny, though the Government warns employers against the harsh treatment of these workers. Physical and sexual abuse appears to be common among some Singapore employers, according to extensive media reports. On an average, about 80 cases of severe maid abuse reach the courts each year in Singapore.

Abuse is one reason one of my respondents, a 45 year old Indian businessman, gives for the Government not wanting to recruit maids from China, ascribing such a policy to the state’s attitude towards race. He says, “The Chinese cannot bear torturing their own kind. It’s easier to do that to Indians, Indonesians, Sri Lankans or Filipinos”. He continues pointing to a racial dimension in the state’s policy of not recruiting domestic maids from China:

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<sup>50</sup> Whilst punitive measures like imprisonment, fines and deportation of overstayers is common in many countries, the brutality of canning such offenders as inflicted in Singapore seems unprecedented in this day and age.

Although Singapore declares that foreign talent and manpower is open to all nationalities, in reality what's being practised smacks of apartheid. If local Chinese wives worry that their husbands would be seduced by their China maids, what about Malays and Indians?

Another interviewee agrees: "The truth is, domestic maid work is one of those dirty and degrading work not considered fit for a Chinese. Besides, would the local Chinese employers mistreat their own kind the way others have been?" Upset at the exploitation of these workers from some of the countries like India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Philippines, another incensed resident tells me: "It is nothing but a demographic game... While the Bangladeshis who can speak and write English sweep the void decks and clear dustbins in HDB apartments, the Chinese without a single word of English get the better jobs and within six months are able to become Permanent Residents while the Banglas go home. Why compartmentalize jobs to race?" Interviewing a maid agency, I was told that the Ministry of Manpower will not issue a work permit for domestic maids from China.

Large numbers of unskilled Indian construction workers began arriving in Singapore in the 1990s and their numbers continued to swell as the demand for manual workers increased. Their presence was not contested by the local populace until their large numbers were felt in Little India where residents claimed disturbed their neighbourhood. For many of these workers, Little India is a 'home away from home' and therefore their comfort zone. It is a predominantly Indian landscape where Indian goods are sold by Indians for Indians. In this way, it is reminiscent of the way things are back in India. Over time Indian workers have also gained an emotional attachment to the landscape because their Sundays are spent there. It is a day when they meet up with friends, receive mail, make calls, send remittances and shop for their essentials. These routine activities in themselves do not pose a problem for residents. However, the manner in which these activities have concentrated in Little India is seen as a problem. Many of the workers often congregate in public access paths, open spaces, outside public housing flats and in almost every other common space available (see Plates 9 and 10).<sup>51</sup> Little India is therefore avoided by most Singaporeans, particularly on Sundays, because of the overwhelming concentration of what my Chinese interviewees see as "dark-skinned" people. Local residents respond

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<sup>51</sup> T C Chang, "Singapore's Little India: A Tourist Attraction as a Contested Landscape," *Urban Studies* 37, 2 (2000): 343-366.

with mixed feelings at the sight of hundreds of foreign workers congregating in every inch of space in the Little India area. While some Singaporeans are prepared to tolerate them, others are not so accommodating. Says Kannappan, a 31-year old male Singapore Indian executive who deliberately avoids Little India on Sundays:

They look so dirty and menacing, aimlessly walking in the middle of the road and posing a danger when I drive and to other motorists as well. I also see some of them lying on the pavements... they are a sorry sight.

Yet another local, 39-year old Sachdev has this to say about the construction workers: “I feel more like a foreigner whenever I go to Little India on Sundays”. Forty two year old Krishnan, a merchant banker, is equally contemptuous of the foreign construction workers. He says:

They spoil the image of Indians by their behaviour, poor dress habits, and various mannerisms like holding hands with their fellow workers and talking loudly. Singaporeans form stereotypes of local Indians from these workers.

These views indicate that many local Indians judge these manual workers by prevailing norms of modernity and cosmopolitanism in Singapore.

Singapore women also say they prefer to avoid Little India on Sundays as they “hate” the “stares” of the foreign workers which they interpret as sexual harassment. Geeta, a 21-year old university student, says that she is being watched by these workers as she walks along Serangoon Road. “I don’t like the way they gaze at me... It’s so disgusting... He may be having evil intentions”. Says another Indian local housewife in her 30s, “They always stare at you as though they have never seen a woman in their lives... I feel so uncomfortable”. Such views are common from women of all ethnicities who venture to stroll along Serangoon Road on Sundays.

As I have shown above, my interviewees, even local Indians, portray foreign manual workers as being noisy, smelly and drunk, attitudes that contribute to racial stereotyping. Residents also complain that they avoid these workers as their presence is a threat to their personal safety and that they were littering the place.<sup>52</sup> Through media reports, Little India is also constructed as a landscape to be avoided because of the presence of these Indian workers. Consequently the stereotypes of these Indians remain etched in the memory of the Singaporean who is familiar with the historical attitude attributed to Indians. Their contributions to the economy are obscured by the

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<sup>52</sup> Chang, “Singapore’s Little India”.

negative construction of their 'polluting presence'. Such negative portrayals – based on both race and class - also affect the other Singapore Indian communities and not just Indian workers alone, racial connotations playing a major part in these portrayals. These connotations are accentuated by onlookers classifying all these foreign workers as Indians when in fact about half of them are from Bangladesh, as my observation shows. All in all, the stigma attached to the 'Indian' has affected racial politics since colonial days, thereby complicating the processes of ethnic and national identity.

On the other hand, by classifying Little India as a heritage zone for tourism and heritage purposes, the state promotes the area as a 'front space' that is projected for tourist consumption. Such a projection however excludes the presence of the foreign workers from the Indian subcontinent. Their presence is ignored from STB and URA tourist brochures of Little India implying that these "dark-skinned" people were not worthy of being included in the state's heritage or touristic value of Little India because again by implication their presence pollutes, contaminates and threatens the image the state promotes of the place. Such a situation exposes, in the opinion of people interviewed, a racially negative connotation in the state's treatment of such individuals as well as all Indians, racial stereotyping being based on skin colour – a hangover from colonial days. Says Indian construction worker Marimuthu who with his fellow workers from India congregates in the area every Sunday:

We are treated like dirt. The Government puts lots of restrictions and conditions during our stay here, our Chinese boss gives us a low wage, shabby and congested accommodation and the people think we are a nuisance when we gather in the open spaces in this area. That is our fate... but we need the money to pay off the agents as well as help our families in India survive.

He implies that the foreign worker treats his landscape as 'back space' or 'front space' as the situation demands. His co-workers who had gathered around him also held similar views which were reinforced by sympathetic opinions from local Indians who had come to Little India to shop as well as the Indian shopkeepers in the area. Remarks Senthil Mohan, a 55-year old manager of an employment agency working from an office in Serangoon Plaza recruiting foreign workers:

Little India gives them a feeling of home and this is the only place in Singapore they feel safe and comfortable. They have a deep sense of attachment to Little India as it reminds them of their home country. They have come here for survival and yet they are being discriminated by

everybody. Even many other Chinese friends I know don't like their presence here – I think it must be because they perceive these workers to be noisy, smelly and dirty. This is not really true. It's just a prejudice borne out of race I think, because if you are dark-skinned, people here assume you are Indian.<sup>53</sup>

His remarks about how the Chinese feel towards the presence of these Indian labourers bring to mind vivid memories of what a Chinese PAP backbencher in Parliament remarked during a Parliamentary sitting: Little India looked “pitch-black” because of the presence of these workers, a racist remark which provoked a storm of protest from the Indian community. He was seen by Indians as expressing a perceived threat posed to the state by the presence of the foreign Indian workers – a racial slant for which they expressed their displeasure. Interestingly, state treatment of these foreign workers in this contact zone is occasionally subverted by instances of workers dressing immaculately, complete with neatly pressed long-sleeved shirts and mobile phones to gain an air of respectability not only from fellow workers but also from the Singapore public. The consensus among respondents is that the Chinese tend to be contemptuous of these Indian workers. Interviewing a Chinese female 32-year old computer operator in Serangoon Road one particular Sunday, I observe how angrily she reacts when I bring up the subject of the foreign workers. Adopting a rather racist tone she says she would never again visit Little India on Sundays and expresses her opinion that it is of no surprise that Indians are subject to stereotyping, confirming a historical prejudice based on race. As Letchumanan, a middle-aged manager of a large departmental store in Serangoon Plaza recounts,

My Chinese friends do not like the presence of these workers. They consider them an embarrassment to the image of Singapore as a highly modernized and sophisticated commercial hub.

The Chinese contempt for the Indian foreign workers – they are often said to “reek of coconut oil or toddy”, “dress in mismatched and garishly coloured attire”, “talk loudly in a funny Indian accent” – is extrapolated in such a way that these popular perceptions of immigrant Indians envelop the local Indians as well. The position of local Indians, already subject to stereotypes drawn from historical events, therefore becomes more problematic as they relate to other ethnic communities, rendering the

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<sup>53</sup> In Chinese mythology devils are portrayed as black. Hence the Chinese nickname Indians as *Keling Kwai*, “keling” being a derogatory term for Indians since colonial times and “kwai” meaning devil.

possibility of national integration and nation building on the basis of racialized identities even more complex.

#### **4.5 Indian talent**

In contrast to Indian foreign workers, the term ‘Indian talent’ refers to those employed in white collar jobs in professional, managerial and entrepreneurial fields such as finance, banking, computer technology and business services. They receive much higher salaries (not less than \$1,500) compared to ‘foreign workers’ and are conversely seen as ‘highly skilled’. Their employment pass allows them to contribute to the Central Provident Fund social security scheme, denied to the construction workers and domestic maids. They are also provided with generous Government housing, education and other concessions which the foreign workers are prevented from participating in. The government has put several incentives in place to attract such talent and to encourage them to settle in Singapore. Subsidized housing, fast track employment pass applications and Permanent Residence status are some of the incentives currently in place. Such favourable treatment contrasts sharply with the experiences of ‘foreign workers.’ In short, ‘Indian talent’ is strongly desired by the government and the professionals are actively encouraged to sink their roots in Singapore.

Indian “talent” began arriving in 1990 when the Singapore government decided to attract professional and managerial skills where such expertise was in short supply. The search intensified in the mid-1990s as globalization and the new knowledge economy took off.<sup>54</sup> Former Deputy Prime Minister and now Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has praised Indian expatriate professionals in Singapore and mentioned that their children have distinguished themselves in local schools.<sup>55</sup> The latest population census of 2000 has revealed that Indians were ahead of other racial groups in terms of academic qualifications, though it does not disclose that this increase was partly due to the entry of Indian graduate Permanent Residents. Former Prime Minister and now Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong had also encouraged Singaporeans to welcome Indian talent because of their potential to enhance the

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<sup>54</sup> *The Straits Times*, 4 November 2000.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 March 1999.

overall 'talent pool.'<sup>56</sup> Such an exhortation to locals was interpreted through the Prime Minister's perceived failure to accord sufficient importance to the concerns of local Singaporean.<sup>57</sup> His contention that "there was no special reason why I should address the so-called problems of the Indian community" also generated among them a sense of neglect.<sup>58</sup> Local Indians felt that greater importance was being placed by the state on expatriate professionals from India. A typical response is that of Pavithran, a 37-year old locally born Indian working as a supervisor in a company employing Indian professionals:

We are not against the Government's encouragement of Indian expatriate workers, but this should not be at our expense and usefulness. As locals, our stake is in this country whereas these foreigners leave once they get a better deal somewhere. They have no loyalty to Singapore, even though the Government has welcomed them here.

This community of new "expatriate" Indian migrants also contributes to existing stereotypes or to the formation of new stereotypes that affect the lives of Singapore's Indian communities and the construction of 'Indian' as a socially meaningful category. Being well-educated many of them I spoke to appear to harbour some form of class consciousness and cultural superiority over local Indians. Thirty-four year- old software engineer Kumar and Sreedevi, another systems analyst, complain: "Singapore Indians lack cultural identity and behave as though only they are civilized. They try to demean us and our ways. They are just arrogant". 30 year-old chartered accountant Ghosh feels that Indians here have forgotten their roots. He elaborates: "Many locals, not having travelled to India, have no idea that India and Indians there are well advanced and well educated. They are too proud and arrogant as they only know and talk about the poverty and corruption prevalent in India". All these responses emphasize a reference to the Indian homeland as representative of Indian culture and "Indianness". Yet another professional from India, 42 year-old John Mathews sees Singapore Indians as being jealous of them because jobs had been given to professionals from India, thereby perceiving that the locals, in search of jobs, had lost out to the Indians from India. Mathews argues that it was the Singapore

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<sup>56</sup> *The Straits Times*, 24 November 2002.

<sup>57</sup> Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong at the 2002 National Day Rally and reported in *The Straits Times* of 27 August 2002.

<sup>58</sup> *The Straits Times*, 24 November 2002.



Government that had offered them the jobs at salaries well below the local rate. Such perceptions underline the fact that Indian talent tries to subvert the marginal position assigned to them by local Indians. I was not surprised therefore to observe from my interviews that local Singaporeans are equally contemptuous of the professional Indians from India. Says a 47 year-old local-born Indian named Senthil, whose great grandparents migrated from India in the nineteenth century, “these expat Indians think the world about themselves... they are snobbish”. Such views are echoed by another local Indian, a plumber by the name of Raj, who talks about being insulted by expat Indians. He recalls one incident: “When I went to their house to do some plumbing work, they treated me like a servant and ordered me around as they do their servants in India. They are very bossy”. Some other local Tamils I spoke to mention that there is an obvious class divide between the local Indians - particularly the low income-earning Tamils - and the expatriate Indians. Remarks Ramasamy who is employed as an artisan, “ These expatriates, though they are Indians themselves, only want to improve themselves and have no interest in wanting to interact with or even offer any real help to us Tamils”.

Together with localized Indians, Indian professional talent and Indian construction workers/domestic servants can therefore be seen as part of a broader ‘Indian diaspora’. Their engagements with each other and with the broader Singaporean multicultural community have been shaped by stereotypes and racial ideology that they contest and resist. In turn, they too contribute to stereotypes and racial ideology that affect the construction of ‘Indian’ ethnic identity in the context of the nation state’s social construction of CMIO ideology.

As I have demonstrated above, ‘Indians’ as units of analysis and objects of anthropological interest are inherently problematic, because clearly ‘Indians’ are not a monolithic and homogeneous entity. While this can be said to be characteristic of all ethnic groups in the Singapore context, ‘Indians’ have access to fewer uniting factors than the other ethnic groups.<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, I have made a conscious decision to continue using the label, but within quotation marks to denote its problematic nature. In Singapore’s highly racialised climate, race names provided by historical factors and the dominant discourse of the CMIO model are the most obvious and logical ways in

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<sup>59</sup> There are greater and more visible attempts on the part of the state to portray the Malay and Chinese ethnic groups as united, with Malays having a unifying religion in Islam and Chinese a unifying language in Mandarin.

which Singaporeans classify others and themselves. Furthermore, in the discourse and imagination of the state and the citizens, ‘Indians’ and ‘Tamils’ are predominantly synonymous. Given the numerical preponderance of Tamils, the state’s ideal ‘Indian’ is one who belongs to the Tamil dialect group as discussed earlier in this chapter.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, one central problematic in my thesis is what it means to be an ‘Indian’ in the Singapore context. The definition of ‘Indians’ I have adopted would include Sri Lankans, Sikhs, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis – this is also the official position - all of whom, I gather from my interviews, are less than happy to have their homeland identified as India which, as we know today, is itself an artificial and political construct borne out of colonial rule and administration. As Nelson pronounces, “the imposed geographical boundaries, for the most part, are marks of a violent dismemberment - scars that testify to the troubled history of the subcontinent.”<sup>61</sup> His perception is echoed by Salman Rushdie, who writes, “In all the thousands of years of Indian history, there never was a creature as a united India”.<sup>62</sup> Despite these claims to historical reality, many of my respondents share the logically defined political and physical space of India as a common place of origin, imagining it as a place imbued with emotional attachments.

The conceptualization of ‘Indian’ communities outside India as diasporas is still very much contested. The blurring of the boundaries demarcating immigrant groups from diasporas further complicates the scenario. The ‘Indian’ diaspora in Singapore detracts in important ways from established traditional classifications. For one, a majority of the new generation of Singaporean ‘Indians’ are not amenable to eventual return to their homeland. To speak of an ‘Indian’ diaspora is thus to assume and insist on an underlying and essential historical and/or psychological commonality that binds and unites the disparate scatterings of ‘Indian’ peoples. Even though the younger ‘Indian’ population in Singapore may not be read and accepted as an example of a diaspora, it may be postulated that they are connected by a diasporic consciousness that extends beyond mere affinity to the place of origin that immigrants

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<sup>60</sup> Nirmala Purushotam, “Disciplining Difference: Race in Singapore” in *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and Politics of Representation*, ed. Joel S Kahn (New York: St. Martin's Press; Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), 84.

<sup>61</sup> Emmanuel S Nelson, “Introduction”, in *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Emmanuel S Nelson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992).

<sup>62</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 27.

for the most part experience. Such a diasporic condition becomes only too obvious when Singaporean Indians' self-defining ability is compared to other fellow Singaporean Chinese or Malays. As an Indian respondent once remarked to me:

Why is it that when Indians meet, they invariably talk about things Indian – about our sub-ethnic identities, or about our relatives in India? Look at the Chinese, they seldom discuss their ethnic connections in China. The Malays too have no such talking point.

Such a consciousness is borne out of my own experience and observing 'young' Indians in Singapore over the years. The lure of the Indian cinema, Indian music, Indian fashions, Indian culture and Indian way of life, pride in India's spell of successes in the Miss World/Universe titles and the impact it has made on the Indian psyche combined with the Singapore nation state's emphasis on ethnicity have all contributed to the diasporic attachment to India and things Indian, a situation very unlike that in countries like Fiji, West Indies, Kenya or South Africa where Indian migrants have less diasporic connection with India.

To proclaim that first generation migrants fervently preserve ties to their originating countries, second generation migrants are more than eager to shed the mantle of their origins and assimilate into the host society mainstream, and third generation migrants consciously attempt to excavate buried ethno-national traditions and sentiments would be a very idealistic and simplistic generalization.<sup>63</sup> My fieldwork has shown that this is not the case. Indeed, my own mother, a second generation migrant, feels proud to be an Indian, inheriting such a great historic civilization and even though a lot of the traditions have lost their significance in Singapore she still keeps up with Indian customs, culture and religion. So do I as a third generation Indian in Singapore because I consider myself to be part of the 'Indian' diaspora in complex ways, at times rather reluctantly and at other times almost religiously. My family and I maintain close contact and connections with the original 'homeland' and this obsession with the supposed land of our origins has always fascinated me. To me, the quintessential 'Indian' in Singapore does not exist. She is a myth! On the other hand, two of my three sons (fourth generation descendants) who are also settled in New Zealand feel less proud to be an Indian as

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<sup>63</sup> This is reminiscent of the *issei* (first generation), *Nisei* (second generation) and *sansei* (third generation) respectively, referring to Japanese migrants in the United States (Siddique & Purushotam, *Singapore's Little India*).

their exposure to peer influence, western lifestyles and attitudes makes them less sentimental and nostalgic about India. Thus I made the decision to include amongst my respondents, first generation immigrants as well as respondents from subsequent migrant generations. I have also, consciously, included gender and caste, as according to Spivak, men and women share differential migratory experiences.<sup>64</sup>

Shanthi, a 26-year old teacher says she always felt a close affinity to India and Indian cultural traditions:

partly because everyone sees that I'm Indian and partly because the Government tells us to be proud of our customs and traditions. Moreover my grandparents come from India though my parents and I were born here. My grandparents and parents maintain close contact with India. I also hear that dual citizenship is going to be introduced and I'm looking forward to it. To me identification as an Indian is very important – after all don't I look Indian? But at the same time I'm proud to be a Singaporean too.

It can therefore be argued that there is a dominance of ethnic perspectives over the 'racialised' national identity.<sup>65</sup> While Shanthi values a diasporic ethnic attachment to India she also celebrates her dual identity with the Singapore nation state. Such an attitude is prevalent amongst the majority of local born Indians most of whom pride themselves with ethnic identification while also owing allegiance to the nation state's ideologies, although ethnic identity is perceived to take precedence. The state's multiracial ideology has encouraged respect for dual ethnic and national identities, the state imploring Singaporean Indians to strike a balance between preserving ethnic identity and being "stoutly Singaporean".<sup>66</sup> However, ethnic identification, respondents explain, is heightened by the state's racial categorizations that make people of different ethnicities aware of their differences in language, religion, culture and physical appearance, as well as by stereotypical attitudes of the various communities towards the Indian community. Says Das, a 44-year old company clerk:

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<sup>64</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Diasporas Old and New: Women in the Transnational World," *Textual Practice* 10, 2 (1996): 245-270.

<sup>65</sup> A theoretical discussion of the differentiation in these socially constructed terms "race" and "ethnicity" is at Chapter 5.5. These terms are used synonymously in the Singapore context, political and community leaders preferring to use the words "race" or "racial" in speeches and in official announcements. Likewise Singaporeans of all ethnicities commonly use the word "race" to mean ethnicity, indicating the historical origins of the word.

<sup>66</sup> Speech by George Yeo, Minister for Information and the Arts, to SINDA on 14 August 1998.

I face the problem of racial discrimination in buses and trains. Sometimes when I board a bus or train, I observe that if the passenger sitting next to me happens to be Chinese, he quickly moves away and tries to find another seat next to a Chinese or prefers standing if no other seat is vacant. Similarly when a Chinese boards the train or bus and finds the seat beside me vacant, he seldom takes the vacant seat. Even if he does, he sits awkwardly as if my presence next to him is repulsive. If he's given a choice to sit next to an Indian or Chinese, invariably he prefers sitting next to his own race.

This occurrence, for instance, is an all-too common experience that Indians of all social strata, be they local Indians, Indian foreign workers or Indian professionals repeatedly love to recount. They are all unanimous in saying that established stereotypes based on skin colour, dress or other negative perceptions of being an Indian engender discriminatory treatment – a discrimination they attribute to 'race'.

Common complaints from respondents also arise from interactions with members of other communities in various situations, particularly in lifts and taxis. Describing such an incident, Parvathy, a 38-year old housewife, says:

I flagged down a taxi, initially he hesitated because I looked Indian but reluctantly accepted me as a passenger. To add insult to injury, I observed the Chinese taxi driver covering his nose with one hand during the trip. He also wound down his window although it was an air-conditioned taxi.

This incident reveals two aspects of 'racial' discrimination as Parvathy described it. One is the fact that she belonged to the Indian 'race'. Secondly and as a consequence, the stereotypical perception popularly attributed to Indians – that Indians are smelly and dirty. Obviously the taxi driver's prejudice has blinded him into associating all Indians with the smell of coconut oil that traditional Indians use to groom their tresses. Incidentally coconut oil exudes a characteristic smell that is now associated with some Indian foreign workers in Singapore. A similar incident was recounted by 37-year old Sripathy who resides in an HDB apartment block in Little India. Residing on the ninth floor the father of two school going children explains that it was normal for him to use the lift daily in the mornings to take them to school before he left for work. Members of the Chinese community in particular, he observed, stood away from him in the lift. Their reaction towards his presence was most felt when the lift was crowded. He observes as follows, "In such situations, some of them strain their

bodies to one side so as to avoid touching me. They also turn their backs towards me. This happens quite often”. Faced with such pressures, Indians consider ethnicity to be their defining characteristic beyond any national identity. They are more likely to take comfort in their own community, as they feel isolated, alienated and under siege. Such feelings lead them to adopt their symbols of ethnic identity as a defence mechanism. They therefore retreat into the comfort zone of their own ethnicity rather than in a national identity that, to them, has little direction.

Indian foreign workers, it would appear, are the group most affected by these negative stereotypes. The state recognizes ‘Indian’ at the national CMIO level, yet migrants who are Indian do not appear to fit easily into Singapore and gain acceptance. At the same time Singaporean Indians by extension feel estranged from local Singaporean society although they are also Indians by state definition. Another common concern of racism registered by local Indians as well as by professional workers from India occurs when they need to rent a house or apartment from a Chinese. Very often they are turned away on some pretext. One local Indian engineer Suresh talks of his encounter with a Chinese landlord who said that Indian curry cooking was too smelly because of overcooking and that the whole house reeked of the bad odour: “He also complained that we Indians placed weird-looking idols for prayer and this was not good for his ‘feng shui’”. Another common stereotype was the result of the state’s frequent educational, occupational and income profiling of various ethnic groups in Singapore (see Tables 15 in Chapter 6.3 and 18-22 in Chapter 8.2), resulting in Chinese landlords questioning the affordability of the Indians. A senior expatriate industrial engineer 58-year old Arun from the United States working on a consultancy project in Singapore was subject to what he considered “insulting and prejudiced treatment” when he was asked by the landlord whether he could afford the high rent. Payment was never a problem in his case, yet his ability to pay was considered suspect because he was Indian – an attitude caused by racist tendencies.

Placing all these identifications in balance, it is no surprise that the state’s ideology of multiracialism, multiculturalism, multilingualism and multireligiosity with added emphasis on racial distinctions has engendered dual consciousness, the central idea within diasporic discourse. In the practice of such a discourse, a member of a minority group becomes acutely aware of his or her ethnicity in relation to other ethnicities and with the major community group in the context of the multiethnic

setting of Singapore. Says news editor Jayabalan, “We are reminded again and again by the Government and in state discourse that we are Indians. We have to produce our identity card wherever we go in Singapore – it always shows that we are ‘Indian’ by race, although we really belong to various sub-ethnic categories”.

‘Indian’ as a marker of both ethnic and national identity is therefore a very ‘real’ category in the Singapore context. Consequently minorities are conditioned to view themselves as subordinated and marginalized, an attitude that necessarily enforces self-identification in a ‘racialised’ dichotomy of majority-minority in which the minority react by religiously hoarding and institutionalizing their ‘otherness’ as their cultural heritage. It is such an attitude that encourages Singapore Indians to seek refuge in diasporic identification thereby emphasizing ethnic identity over national identity.

Ethnic consciousness among these Indians has become pronounced as I discovered in their responses. Karthikeyan, a 29-year old locally born clerk working for a private firm has this to say:

I am a proud Indian and I think most Indians in Singapore are like me. We are committed to our Indianness because the Government leaders want us to cherish and value our culture and traditions... It’ll take many many years before all the races in Singapore can evolve and integrate with a common identity, because they too, like me, cling to their culture and traditions.

In Singapore, I observed from my Indian respondents, the question now is not one of developing a new, integrated Singaporean identity but an ethnic cultural identity that abides by a state ideology emphasizing ethnic groups and ethnic affiliation. The state has encouraged, in the pursuit of its multiracial and multicultural policies, the learning of one’s own language (in addition to English), the embracing of one’s religion, culture and traditions to counter the threat of “social and moral pollution”, these values having been given state recognition in an ‘Asian Values’ discourse and later enshrined since 1995 in a ‘Shared Values’ political ideology supposedly derived from the rich heritages of Asian civilizations.<sup>67</sup> However, these measures have been widely perceived by ethnic minorities in Singapore as according undue importance to Chinese language and culture in a multiethnic society like Singapore. Consequently, they feel marginalized and alienated from the national project, a situation that gives

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<sup>67</sup> Geoffrey Benjamin, “The Cultural Logic of Singapore’s ‘Multiculturalism’” in *Singapore: Society in Transition*, ed. Riaz Hassan (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), 123.

rise to a collision between ethnic and national identities. As described by one respondent, Murali, a 31-year old technician in an engineering company,

There's too much emphasis on Chineseness in Singapore. Bilingualism actually means English and Mandarin. I thought all the races should be treated equally because that's what our Constitution says, but the Government gives importance only to the Chinese and their values. As Indians we have no say because we are in the minority and our Indian leaders in Parliament do not really fight for our ethnic or national rights. Most of the Indian MPs don't even speak Tamil although they are Singaporean Tamils themselves. The Government says the various races can speak freely about their rights but in practice it's not that easy.

Identity is for the most part an intensely personal and unquestioned aspect of an individual's being and existence. This would seem to be all the more pronounced in a highly 'racialised' society like Singapore where one's identity is not only determined and designated by the state, but one is reminded of one's identity by the entry of 'race' on one's identity card and in numerous daily encounters with other ethnic communities and in state discourse. In the CMIO categorization of ethnicities by the state, 'Indian' as a classification is readily accepted by people of Indian ancestry, even though within the community they identify themselves by their sub-ethnic categories such as Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Gujarati, Bengali, Malayalee and so on. Self-definition as an 'Indian' therefore appears to be of great significance to these individuals in their relations with other ethnicities in the multiethnic diversity of Singapore. As software engineer Sanjay puts it,

Other races would not be familiar with our sub-ethnic identities. In any case Government and official records recognize us only as 'Indian' and not on the basis of these other identities. So for all intents and purposes and even though the Government's definition of our identity and ethnicity is too simplistic, it makes sense to be identified as Indian and we are proud of it.

Such an attitude conforms to Appiah's argument that we should recognize and acknowledge the relational constructedness of our identities.<sup>68</sup> In a not dissimilar way it can be argued that the identification of 'Indian' was in the first place a racial construct imposed on the basis of biological and physical traits by British colonialism

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<sup>68</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).



in India centuries ago and perpetuated in Singapore. Racial distinctiveness between the various ethnic communities has therefore become the ideological basis of colonial and postcolonial Singapore society.

From interviews with Singaporean Indians I observe that ethnic identity and ethnic consciousness have heightened diasporic attachments. First generation migrants hark back to a supposed homeland, even though they left it several decades earlier. To these individuals ethnic identity takes precedence over national identity as 82-year old widower Retnam, a one-time resident of Little India and now living with his eldest son and their family in a flat in the vicinity testifies nostalgically, “There is no place like India for me. As I still have ancestral property left by my parents as well as relatives there I would like to go back and die there but my children here don’t want me to leave them and return to India”. His romanticized construction of India does not register with his locally born 49-year old son Damodharan though the latter still holds steadfastly to his Indian way of life and things Indian.

While I may not want to return to India like my father does, I’m still a staunch Indian and will not let go my identity and culture. I like to dress traditionally as well as watch Tamil movies and hear music from India, and I’ve made several visits to India but though these ties still bind me to my ethnic culture, my identity is predominantly with Singapore where I was born and bred. Of course some of the Government’s policies here are very pro-Chinese and to some extent racist but so long as I’m able to keep my Indian way of life, I’m happy to be a Singaporean Indian. The Government also encourages me to maintain my Indian culture.

This category of Singaporeans grew up in a society where in the years immediately after independence, the state placed overriding importance on the development of a common national identity as a way to integrate the ethnically diverse peoples into a racially harmonious society. Ethnic identity was then relegated to the background of racial politics and Damodharan’s response is reflective of this mood. While he clings to his Indianness, he places a high profile to his sense of national identity as a Singaporean Indian. He is typical of the majority of second-generation Singaporean Indians interviewed. They hold strong connections to their Indian ethnicity but at the same time align themselves closely with the state ideology of nation building. Interestingly Damodharan’s son Vijay, a 22-year old first year humanities student at the National University of Singapore, though born and bred completely in the post-

independent milieu of Singapore, holds very strong views about his identities. To him being an Indian is “everything” he is proud of because this identity “signified his place in Singapore society” and although he values his Singapore citizenship and identification with national goals, his “loyalty to ethnicity ranked higher than national identity”. Vijay’s attitude is typical of the present new generation of Singaporean Indians who grew up completely in the new multiracial, multicultural environment of postcolonial Singapore. While his parents and others like them were coaxed into subscribing to the goals of national identity more than ethnic identity, people of his generation, that is those born since the late 1970s, had ethnic identity and ethnic consciousness (in line with specific Asian cultural values) disciplined into them, national identity then assuming a lower level of priority. In such an atmosphere ethnic fervour flourished for all communities, Singaporean Indians showing particularly strong diasporic affiliations with pride in Indian cultural and educational attainments. For instance, the demand for software professionals from India, its increasing importance for Singapore trade and investments, and success in international beauty pageants all held the imagination and awe of Singaporean Indians towards India - Vijay is one of them.

Their responses demonstrate that while first generation migrant grandfather Retnam clings to compelling and sentimental constructions of his diasporic homeland India which he would like to return to eventually, locally-born son Damodharan does not regard India as homeland in the conventional sense though he is still emotionally attached to his Indian identity and lifestyle. Damodharan, unlike his father, is more aligned with national identity while he is comfortably maintaining his ethnic identity in the midst of the other communities in Singapore. On the other hand Vijay, is very much a staunch Indian, but also feels proud to be a Singaporean. Locally born Damodharan and son Vijay typify the high levels of ethnic and national identification prevalent among younger Singaporeans today. Vijay continues:

My family’s been here for generations. I’ve never been to India but it’s still a big part of my life. My culture and identity come from India and I like to identify with it as much as possible. I also know where I stand among the other races in Singapore and although I’m a loyal citizen I also love my ethnic identity.

Diaspora, an emotional affiliation to India as a cultural reference point, obviously continues to play a very vital role in the lives of young as well as older Singaporean

Indians, confirming the words of Skrbis: “Diasporas are the breeding places for the creation of idealistic beliefs, pertaining to the past, the present and a possible future”.<sup>69</sup> Hence the hyphenated Singaporean-Indian implies a hybridized diasporic identity composed of both Singaporean and Indian hybrid elements. Respondent Kamala summarizes the position of Indians in Singapore in a nutshell, “I’m a Singaporean when I’m in India, I’m Indian when I’m in Singapore”.

Apart from strong diasporic attachments to India affecting the identities of Indians in Singapore, the ethnic community is also buffeted by perceived attitudes and stereotypes from the other ethnic groups in the CMIO taxonomy. As Shankar explains,

In Singapore we are definitely made aware of our race by the way the Chinese look down on us. They think they are far superior and at the same time tend to treat us contemptuously by harbouring age-old commonly held negative notions of us as dirty, smelly drunkards and as fit only for manual labour as coolies.

Since race is a primary mode of classification in Singapore, socially constructed notions of race inform people’s everyday perceptions and imagination of both themselves and others. Physical attributes such as the way an Indian dresses (use of the saree, *pottu* and *viboodhi*) and his/her skin colour (brown) are seen as markers of particular racial categories.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, certain customs and practices are often associated with each ‘race’. In addition, through educational and occupational profiling in the popular media, races are projected comparatively as performing better or worse. Invariably, as far as the Indians are concerned, they are portrayed as lagging behind the Chinese in terms of socio-economic levels and occupying lower-paying jobs across all industries, although their position is considered better than the Malays. All the above contribute to social construction and stereotyping of each race in a particular way – a relic of British colonialism inherited by the nation state on independence. Although new migrants from India may perceive themselves as different from Singaporean ‘Indians’ or vice versa, the dominant signifier of ‘Indian’ affects their everyday encounters in Singapore too.

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<sup>69</sup> Zlatko Skrbis, *Long-distance Nationalism: Diasporas, Homelands and Identities* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1999), 184.

<sup>70</sup> The vermilion or other coloured dot used by Indian women on their foreheads. The red dot normally signifies that the woman is married. Unmarried women traditionally have a black dot but it is

Historical attitudes arising from local Indians originating as convicts, rubber tappers and construction labourers in colonial times tend to linger strongly in the minds of the other communities in Singapore, particularly the Chinese. Shankar above attributes this factor as impacting upon the relationship between Indians and the other ethnicities in Singapore although he agrees that there was no open animosity as such. In fact he believes that the Indians get along quite well with the other communities though such a relationship is based on the ethnic communities merely tolerating each other without “any effort to really appreciate or understand one another”. Under these circumstances Shankar believes that for the Indians, integration (with other ethnic groups) and national identity “is some distance away”, as the Indians feel more secure within their community. Suffice it to say, the persistence of ethnic boundaries encouraged in part by self-identification within the community, a dominating sense of diasporic consciousness, perceived attitudes from other ethnic communities and state discourse and policies, all combine to produce for the Singapore Indian community greater attachment to ethnic identification than to the cause of national identity.

‘Indian’ in relation to the state’s incorporation of ‘race’ in the Singapore context bears specific meanings, the most important being that it is a marker of ethnic and national identity as imposed by the state. Characterized by physical features and cultural forms like language, attire and food, these identity markers are doubly strengthened by the state’s exhortation to Indians, as well as the other ethnic communities, to hold fast to their cultural roots and heritage. Consequently ethnic consciousness has become pronounced in the minds of Singaporeans, be they Indians, Chinese or Malays, though there is also a high level of national identification among them – this is particularly true of the younger generation of Indians in Singapore - as my interviews suggest.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

What is not obvious to the non-Singaporean is how the various Indian categories in Singapore perceive themselves, perceive other Indians in Singapore and perceive their relations with Singapore society as a whole. As a member of the ‘Indian’-Singaporean group, I recognize something of myself in the predicament of

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now more fashionable for Indian women to use a coloured pottu to match their clothes. *Viboodhi* is the holy ash used on the forehead.

other 'Indians' localized in Singapore who are in constant negotiation and renegotiation in the public sphere with same-race compatriots and others.

The responses from my interviewees demonstrate that the problematic nature of identities in the context of a globalised and multicultural Singapore has been complicated by serious internal contradictions within the so-called 'Indian' community itself, as well as passive resistance to the state's hegemonic policies of discipline and control. I have therefore considered it important to acknowledge the constructedness and historical baggage attached to these factors in this chapter. Secondly, the political history of Singapore, both during colonial times and in the contemporary nation state, has played a critical role in initiating the shifting of identities and loyalties of the 'Indians' of Singapore. The stabilization of the 'Indian' population, extension of citizenship, acceptance into the national mainstream, diminishing physical and emotional contact with their homeland India, and increasing numbers of Singapore-born 'Indians' have effected fundamental changes in the outlook of the Indians and their orientation towards nation building.<sup>71</sup>

However, the very label of 'Indian' in the state-driven CMIO multiracial ideology presupposes the individual's presumed place of origin in the Indian subcontinent and thus exerts pressure on 'Indians' to become more 'Indian.' This is doubly reinforced by various government initiatives to promote 'ethnic' identification, thereby creating a diasporic attachment to the Indian homeland. Singapore 'Indians' therefore now inevitably look back to their parent country with a telescopic view, limited and artificial, influenced by newly acquired sensibilities. As noted by Benjamin, the state's emphasis on meritocracy and multiracialism as a means of incorporating all the 'races' equally into the national project has resulted in the significance of 'race' as a signifier of differences and divisions between the various ethnic groups in Singapore society.<sup>72</sup> Dual consciousness has created an identity crisis as the minority 'Indians' are disciplined to think of themselves as 'ethnic' subjects and therefore subordinated. In such an environment, they react by clinging to their 'ethnic' cultural identity with its traditional manifestations as my interviews suggest. Additionally, global capitalism, transnational labour mobility, worldwide consumption flows, transnational cultural dissemination and the lure of information

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<sup>71</sup> Senior political leaders including Minister S Dhanabalan have talked about the importance of not just tolerance but acceptance of the minorities by the majorities.

<sup>72</sup> Benjamin, "The Cultural Logic of Singapore's 'Multiracialism'", 122.

technology have all contributed to the racially and ethnically constructed Singapore 'Indians' being caught in the crossfire between two opposing alternatives, the nation-state and the diaspora.

I discovered from many of my respondents that they felt a greater attachment to their ethnic identity than the national identity, while some of them saw these identities as complementing each other thereby exhibiting both ethnic and national identification. I will interrogate in the next and subsequent chapters how ethnic identity and national identity are presently centered on the state's conception of 'race' in relation to the various social engineering policies impacting the Indian community.

## CHAPTER 5

### ‘RACE’, ‘ETHNICITY’ AND THE SINGAPORE NATION STATE

Any intellectual discourse on postcolonial ethnicities or formation of a nation state cannot be conducted without reference to its historical base, which is rooted in colonial history. In Part I of this thesis I looked at how British Singapore’s construction of cultural difference, arising from a European ideology of ‘race’, led to racial segregation of the various communities and the evolution of the Indian settlements in Singapore. Although the concept of ethnicity has gained almost universal currency since the 1920s, the colonial regime saw fit to continue imposing ‘racial’ theories on those it considered to be “inferior” peoples by a system of racial segregation. In a not too dissimilar fashion, the government of the new nation state also found it politically, socially and culturally expedient to adopt an ideology based on ‘race’, this time as a means of integrating various groups and communities. This ideology has continued to evolve even though ethnic heritages, particularly after the 1960s, have been revitalized and re-invented worldwide. The seeds of ‘race’ discourse had been well and truly planted in the psyche of the colony when it became an independent nation in August 1965 so that the new state found it impractical to ignore this social reality. In this chapter, I will explore its evolution in depth and argue that the racial politics introduced by the British have been perpetuated to an extraordinary extent by a paternalistic and hegemonic postcolonial government even though it denies this continuity.

#### 5.1 Introduction

There is a broad scholarly consensus that ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ are social and cultural constructs that are bound up with material and human social processes.<sup>1</sup> However, there are differences in the way these terms are defined and constructed in different contexts. ‘Ethnicity’ as a concept is most difficult to define because of its elusive, fluid and malleable nature. In certain societies, where the term ‘ethnic group’ refers to minorities, the dominant and majority groups do not see themselves as ethnic at all. For instance, Guibernau and Rex highlight that the term ‘ethnic minorities’ is

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<sup>1</sup> A Kobayashi and L Peake, “Unnatural Discourse: Race and Gender in Geography,” *Gender, Place and Culture* 1, 2 (1994): 225-243.

used to refer to ‘non-white’ immigrants in Britain and to migrants in Australia.<sup>2</sup> In Singapore, however, state ideology assigns a ‘race’ to each individual, and individuals identify themselves and others as members of a particular ‘race’ often by virtue of their skin colour and other physical and cultural features. The social significance attached to such outward characteristics by both the state and individuals makes the society ‘multiracial’. This discourse of racial politics has been the cornerstone of government policy and planning, both in colonial and postcolonial times in Singapore and ‘race’ has been treated as ‘natural’ and a taken-for-granted feature of everyday life. The terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘race’ are used interchangeably in official discourse: according to the Singapore Department of Statistics, ‘Ethnic group refers to a person’s race’.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, discussion of race/ethnicity is confined mostly to the private sphere and best not conducted in public, because the state determines what is ethnicity and how it is to be interpreted and practised in daily life and not brook contestation. In private, however, Singaporeans, including my respondents, use the word ‘race’ although they take it to mean ethnicity.

## 5.2 The Evolution of Race as a Worldview

The changes in the way the word ‘race’ has been used since it entered the English language at the beginning of the sixteenth century reflect changes in the popular understanding of the causes of physical and cultural differences. It can be argued that scholars and the general public the world over have been conditioned to viewing human races based on visible physical differences that have acquired socially significant meanings.<sup>4</sup> The social meaning given to racial classifications activates beliefs and assumptions about individuals belonging to a particular racial category. ‘Race’ then becomes socially significant when members of a society routinely divide people into groups based on their physical and biological genetic makeup, namely, a

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<sup>2</sup> M Guibernau and J Rex, *The Ethnicity Reader* (USA: Polity Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore, 2000, 16. As a result, the words ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ are used freely and synonymously by both the state and individuals, with preference for the word ‘race’. Appendix A is a sample collection of random press cuttings and reports which are self-explanatory. The fudging between these words is sometimes taken to extremes when used together – as in “ethnic races” – to form a sentence.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Banton, *Racial and Ethnic Competition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (Routledge: New York, 1994); Glenn C Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).



person's skin colour, size, facial features and speech. According to Smedley, "the very existence of physical differences among populations is accepted as evidence of race".<sup>5</sup> Tracing the evolution of race in America for more than three centuries, she shows that 'race' is a social construct and a cultural invention that was developed and used opportunistically by English colonists since they began settlements in the seventeenth century. Their objective was to maintain boundaries between the colonizer and colonized, 'civilized' and 'savage', 'advanced' and 'backward'.

Ultimately 'race' as an ideology portraying the "social reality of inequality" among human differences subsequently spread to other parts of the world; however the English in North America developed the interpretations of race to a "much higher degree" than the Spanish, Portuguese or French.<sup>6</sup> In particular it became a strategy used by colonial powers everywhere for segregating, ranking and controlling colonized peoples. 'Race' categories helped secure the basis for colonial expansion and were used to justify the supremacy of European colonizers over other 'races' in the colonies. Once the notion of 'race' was created, the idea that there were inherent differences relating to physical appearance took root among the colonial officials.<sup>7</sup> The ideology of colonialism was therefore an ideology of 'race'.<sup>8</sup> Potential for progress was found to be present only in the white European races<sup>9</sup> and differences between whites and others were seen in terms of differences in social, intellectual, physical and psychological abilities.

### **5.3 Race and the Colonial Imagination in Singapore**

British conceptions of 'race' were based on the increasing legitimacy of racial theory with the widespread acceptance of Social Darwinist thought in Europe and the United States and the unquestioned worldwide political, economic and technological

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<sup>5</sup> Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Smedley, *Race in North America*, 16, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Such an attitude was extended to show how differences in brain size corresponded with the degree of civilization and capacity for rational thought of the colonized peoples. The European by comparison had brain development far in excess of these peoples.

<sup>8</sup> Of course the economic objectives of colonialism were significant for the domination of the ideology of race in Singapore as it was in the other British colonies.

<sup>9</sup> And even these were differentiated by race scientists in the late-nineteenth century with Anglo-Saxons or Teutons being seen as superior to Mediterraneans.

dominance of white (especially British) societies. Ideological movements like individualism, utilitarianism, Evangelicalism and Anglo-Saxonism all helped to reinforce British notions of race from the mid-nineteenth century, but it was Social Darwinism that stamped the British attitude of superiority in governing others based on their concept of 'race'.<sup>10</sup> 'Race' became inextricably linked to Western notions of civilization and inspired 'civilizing missions' that assumed the role of a moral crusade. Such an attitude of superiority is summed up in the words of Frederick Weld, "I think that capacity for governing is a characteristic of our race [British] ... Personal government is a necessity for Asiatics; it is the outcome of their religious systems, of their habits of thought, and of long centuries of custom".<sup>11</sup> That such an attitude prevailed in the British governing elite can be seen in similar pronouncements made by many others including Joseph Chamberlain ("I believe that the British race is the greatest of governing races the world has ever seen") and Cecil Rhodes ("the British [are] the best race to rule the world").<sup>12</sup> On this basis of racial superiority British 'race' ideology towards the 'Other' on account of skin colour and differences in cultural and belief structures created a colonial vision of 'race' and the imposition and maintenance of colonial rule in Singapore from the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Once this notion of 'race' was systematised by European colonizers, it became grounded for social, political and economic development purposes.

Ironically, historical records show that the ideology of 'race' never existed in the precolonial period of Singapore's history because prior to the nineteenth century there had already existed different migrant groups in Malaya (which then included Singapore) as in other Southeast Asian societies and that these groups had interacted

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<sup>10</sup> Edwin Lee, *The British as Rulers: Governing Multiracial Singapore 1867-1914* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Sir Frederick Weld, "The Straits Settlements and British Malaya", [speech delivered on 10 June 1884] in *Honorable Intentions: Talks on the British Empire in Southeast Asia delivered at the Royal Colonial Institute 1874-1928*, ed. Paul H Kratoska, (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1983), 46.

<sup>12</sup> R A Huttenback, *Racism and Empire: White Settlers and Colored Immigrants in the British Self-Governing Colonies 1830-1910* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976), 15-16.

<sup>13</sup> In the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: "Europe... consolidated itself as sovereign subject by defining its colonies as 'Others', even as it constituted them for purposes of administration and the expansion of markets". ("The Rani of Sirmur", in *Europe and Its Others*, eds. Francis Barker et al., Colchester: University of Essex, 1985) 128. Raymond Kennedy writes: "The British colonial code... draws the most rigid color line of all" ("The Colonial Crisis and the Future" in *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*, ed. Ralph Linton, New York: Columbia University Press, 1945) 320. Skin colour was, according to historians, taken as the only acceptable criterion for advancement to the highest positions in the colonial administrative service and the European business world.

without any reference to western notions of biological differences that made one group superior to another. For instance, Hirschman considers that ‘racial divisions’ between the three main groups were not present, while Abraham contends that they maintained a degree of harmony in the precolonial period which was disrupted by colonial rule leading to racial polarisation and tensions.<sup>14</sup> Indians and Chinese over the centuries have, for example, demonstrated a high degree of acculturation through marriage. Chinese traders had married Malay women and adopted aspects of Malay culture, becoming known as ‘Babas’ or Straits Chinese. Similarly, Indians had assimilated into Malay society as a result of intermarriage and became known as Jawi Pekan. According to Malaysian scholar and historian Wang Gungwu, an interactive society was already flourishing between the indigenous and migrant communities because of trade. He says that what we know as cultural pluralism (or multiculturalism) today was already “an integral part of a local reality” which was adaptable in absorbing other layers of “pluralism” to come, even through colonialism.<sup>15</sup>

From the mid-nineteenth century, the British brought European racial theory to Singapore and constructed a social, political and economic order structured by ‘race’ and racial stereotypes that led to elaborate social distinctions. In particular, the colonial administration devised a system classifying and cataloguing people so as to justify the colonial creation of the orientalist “Other”. According to research done by Nirmala Purushotam on census reports from 1871-1957, the word ‘race’ gradually evolved over the years – and still prevails in the nation state - as the most significant entry for the purpose of simplifying and classifying the major communities in terms of origin, language, economic value and other essential characteristics – features which continue to form the basis of the tenets of multiracialism, multiculturalism, multilingualism and multireligiosity that foreground the post-colonial Singaporean

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Hirschman, “The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology,” *Sociological Forum* 1, 2 (Spring 1986): 338; Collin Abraham, *The Naked Social Order: The Roots of Racial Polarisation in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications (M) Sdn Bhd, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Wang Gungwu, “Continuities in Island Southeast Asia” in *Reinventing Malaysia: Reflections on its Past and Future*, ed. K S Jomo (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001), 24-25.

and the growth and prosperity of the nation state.<sup>16</sup> The 1871 population census introduced the concept of ‘races’ and, by 1947, the British census had formally categorized the peoples as ‘Europeans’, ‘Malays’, ‘Chinese’, and ‘Indians’ on the basis of ‘race’ – ‘race’ names thus became an “apparatus of knowledge” and hence power.<sup>17</sup> This distinction was a precursor to the ‘race’-defined CMIO categories presently in use.<sup>18</sup> The CMIO quadrotomy can therefore be argued to be a carry-over of the British classification of the different categories of people living in Singapore based on ‘race’. ‘Racial’ distinctiveness between the various communities therefore became the ideological basis of colonial society, which, as Wertheim characterizes, was “moulded on racial principles”.<sup>19</sup> These racial classifications were also used for the division of labour and for the planning of residential areas I will discuss later in this chapter.<sup>20</sup> By extension, it can be argued that the very concept of the nation state and the ideology of ‘multiracialism’ in the Singapore context had its genesis in the colonial era.

The sense of racial superiority and the natural gift for global domination among British colonizers developed in tandem with the categorization of lower racial groups according to physical and intellectual attributes – a result of the British Orientalist attitude, which used ‘race’ as a marker of the ‘inferiority’ of colonised peoples. Such an attitude was based on a colonial ideology that used ‘race’ to justify the economic order of colonial capitalism through the notion of the superiority of white people over ‘races’ of coloured peoples.<sup>21</sup> This underpinned the justification for British colonial administration in Singapore and elsewhere in Asia and its avowed

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<sup>16</sup> Nirmala Purushotam, “Disciplining Difference: Race in Singapore” in *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and Politics of Representation*, ed. Joel S Kahn (New York: St. Martin's Press; Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977/79), 126.

<sup>18</sup> How these ‘racial’ categories have impacted the daily lives of contemporary minority Singaporeans is analysed in this and subsequent chapters.

<sup>19</sup> W F Wertheim, “Southeast Asia,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 1(1968): 423-434.

<sup>20</sup> A Ackerman, *Ethnic Identity by Design or Default: A Comparative Study of Multiculturalism in Singapore and Frankfurt-am-Main* (Postfach: IKO-Verlag fur Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Edward W Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

aim to civilize and modernize colonized peoples. The positioning of native peoples as uncivilized went hand in hand with the construction of negative stereotypes of the Malays, Chinese and Indians – stereotypes that survive till today. British colonial histories and accounts posited the Malay as the ‘lazy native’ and not as industrious as the Chinese and Indian ‘races’. This strategy enabled the British to justify the immigration of the Chinese and Indians, which itself engendered a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ of inferiority among the Malays.<sup>22</sup> The most prominent of British administrators in Singapore, Stamford Raffles, himself portrayed the Malay as “lazy” and “so indolent, that when he has rice, nothing will induce him to work”, suggesting the Malays’ dislike for hard manual and intellectual labour in contrast to the industrious Chinese and Indian ‘races’.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, many other colonial officials, naturalists and historians (to name a few, Sir Frank Swettenham, A R Wallace, Sir Hugh Clifford and Rupert Emerson) contributed to attitudes that were perpetuated in the early twentieth century, although scholars of Malay society (like J S Furnivall, Sir Richard Winstedt and Syed Hussein Alatas) have endeavoured to deconstruct the colonial image of the Malays. The image of the ‘lazy’ and ‘inferior’ Malay still persists in the national imagination, exerting a pervading influence in Singapore not only among non-Malays but even among the Malays as well.<sup>24</sup> Such negative stereotypes persist to the extent that they affect relations between the various ethnic communities and with the state in present-day Singapore, hindering state efforts towards national integration. The nation state expresses the concern that racial and class divisions lead to racial antagonisms and conflict, though it is commonly accepted by my interviewees that class divisions are well entrenched in Singapore’s ideology – in elitism for instance.

As a result of the negative stereotypes generated by colonial ideology, the racial harmony that existed during the precolonial period gave way to antagonisms, ethnocentrism and racial polarization, according to Abraham.<sup>25</sup> An unrestricted immigration policy that allowed the Chinese to dominate the urban political economy

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<sup>22</sup> Abraham, *The Naked Social Order*, xxii.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Stamford Raffles, *Memoir*, v. 1, ed. Sophia Raffles (London: James Duncan, 1835).

<sup>24</sup> Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*.

<sup>25</sup> Abraham, *The Naked Social Order*.

as well as segregation policies of ‘divide and rule’ whereby the Malay, Chinese and Indian populations were kept apart along residential, social and economic lines only served to create inequality, mistrust, friction and racial stereotypes between the communities and between British and Asians (see Part I).<sup>26</sup> Such exploitative political, economic and social structures and policies along with European economic and segregationist policies thus promoted antagonisms among the various groups, leading to the perpetuation of the word ‘race’ as normal acceptable usage in contemporary Singapore society.

While Europeans did not concern themselves with getting Malay labour or cooperation and treated Malays with condescension and paternalism, their attitudes towards the work ethic of the Chinese and Indians in Singapore were vastly different.<sup>27</sup> The Chinese had shown themselves to be extremely hard working and persevering, a quality made use of by the British who almost completely depended on Chinese entrepreneurial activity and manual labour for their economic base. A Singapore colonial merchant describes them: “The Chinese are, as a race, capable of civilization of the highest kind. They are at once labourers and statesmen. They can work in any climate, hot or cold, and they have great mercantile capacity... we are pleased to see them flocking [to Malaya] as they do in thousands”.<sup>28</sup> Yet this quality, while grudgingly admired and respected by the colonial administration, was at the same time viewed with a profound sense of ambivalence and resentment: “In short, whenever there is money to be made, you can be sure that the Chinaman is not far away” and “greedy Chinese”.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to the Chinese, the Indians were looked upon as a source of cheap, expendable and docile labour for the plantation and construction sectors of the economy. British attitude towards the Indians is encapsulated in the 1885 speech of a British official: “There are many who prefer the

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<sup>26</sup> John R Clammer, *Race and State in Independent Singapore 1965-1990: The Cultural Politics of Pluralism in a Multiethnic Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1998).

<sup>27</sup> John G Butcher, *Attitudes of British Colonial Officials toward Malays* (University of Wisconsin, 1971), 62-63.

<sup>28</sup> Walter Adamson, quoted in Kratoska, *Honorable Intentions: Talks on the British Empire in Southeast Asia delivered at the Royal Colonial Institute 1874-1928* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1983), 76-77.

<sup>29</sup> Arnold Wright and Thomas H Reid, *The Malay Peninsula: A Record of British Progress in the Middle East* (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1912), 323; T J Newbold, *Political and Statistical Account of the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca* (London: Albemarle, 1839), 1, 10.

Indian coolie, and consider [them relative to Chinese labor] better suited to the peculiar wants of the locality... . They regard the Indian, moreover, as a creature far more amenable to discipline and management than the sturdy and independent Chinese”.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, at times both groups were lumped together.

To the British, economic considerations, more than anything else, were the prime cause for this ideology of ‘race’ to dominate in colonial Singapore. A system of migrant labour in which racial characteristics were made to coincide with particular occupations enhanced and maintained the salience of ideology in the consciousness of the dominant and dominated classes.<sup>31</sup> British colonialism created a “cultural division of labour”, which was essentially an articulation between ‘ethnicity’ and the economic division of labour in the colonial order based on class and race.<sup>32</sup> Under colonial rule, each group was recruited into particular occupations and this was justified on ideological and essentialist grounds. The unflattering British attitude towards the ‘ethnic’ communities is captured by an early European resident:

From a labour point of view, there are practically three races, the Malays (including Javanese), the Chinese, and the Tamils (who are generally known as Klings). By nature the Malay is an idler, the Chinaman is a thief, and the Kling is a drunkard, yet each in his own class of work is both cheap and efficient, when properly supervised.<sup>33</sup>

According to Furnivall economic inequalities appeared to be based on ‘racial’ differences of the different groups and were made visible and emphasized in the daily life of Singaporeans.<sup>34</sup> As noted by Abraham, the mode of production of the Malays was pre-capitalist whereas that of the Chinese and, to a lesser extent, Indians was

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<sup>30</sup> Walter H Medhurst, quoted in Kratoska, *Honorable Intentions: Talks on the British Empire in Southeast Asia delivered at the Royal Colonial Institute 1874-1928* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1983), 105.

<sup>31</sup> M Burawoy, “The Functions and Reproduction of Migrant Labour: Comparative from Southern Africa and the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology* 81, 5 (1976): 1061.

<sup>32</sup> M Hechter, “Group Formation and the Cultural Division of Labour,” *American Journal of Sociology* 84, 2 (1980).

<sup>33</sup> C G Warnford-Lock, *Mining in Malaya for Gold and Tin* (London: Carwithers and Goodman, 1907), 31-32.

<sup>34</sup> Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and the Netherland Indies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948)..

essentially capitalist.<sup>35</sup> The logical development of this historically evolved form of social relations between capital and labour meant that in the colonial economy, both in the peasant and capitalist sectors, labour became segmented along 'racial' lines and no substantial basis of unity could develop. This equation of 'race' with economic function, Brown asserts, gave rise to the perception by the subordinated groups that it was their racial attributes that determined their economic and class position.<sup>36</sup> By the same token, their ethnic characteristics were presented by the dominant ideology as racial traits. The consequence of such perceptions was that the subordinate status of racialised communities was permanently entrenched.

The British policy of 'divide and rule' based on class and race also compounded the racial division of labour. Indians and Chinese were employed in different jobs and at different wage rates, the consequence of which was to make it impossible for both these migrant groups to come together to engage in any form of collective bargaining. This division of labour along 'racial' lines further reinforced socio-cultural differences between the different groups because of the lack of social interaction between them. This factor, compounded by spatial segregation of both their residential and occupational locations, tended to accentuate differences leading to cleavages, according to Abraham.<sup>37</sup> He notes that colonial immigration policy based on physical differences had served as "boundary mechanism... reinforced by economic and educational inequalities highly correlated with race".<sup>38</sup> The Malays were already confined to rural enclaves and therefore marginalized and insulated from mainstream economic development that was controlled by Chinese businessmen, traders, middlemen and shopkeepers. In towns where there was potential for community contact, residential areas, market places, and recreational space were typically segregated along 'racial' lines. British administration had encouraged the different communities to organize themselves within their own communities at the same time isolating them from one another culturally and politically. As a result,

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<sup>35</sup> Abraham, 419.

<sup>36</sup> David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> Abraham, *The Naked Social Order*.

<sup>38</sup> Raymond W Mack, "Race, Class and Power in Barbados" in *Social Change in Developing Countries*, eds. H R Barringer, G I Blanksten and R W Mack (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965), 135.



the centres of commerce, mining and planting were wholly dominated by Westerners, Chinese and Indians. Everywhere there were self-contained cultural enclaves – Chinatowns, Indian estate labour lines, Chinese tin mines... and Malay villages. Each group lived in its own watertight compartments; there was little economic competition and much social aloofness.<sup>39</sup>

Each group had therefore to fend for itself, creating an environment of racial polarization that endured throughout the colonial period and continues in the nation state today. The structural inequalities imposed by the British on these three groups were therefore responsible for poor ‘race’ relations between the communities while they strengthened colonial power relationships. As Murphree has noted, “race relations... are effectively power relations”.<sup>40</sup> The stereotypes of the ‘lazy native’ and his inherent racial ‘inferiority’ and ‘incapability’ to compete economically with the Chinese and Indians (an ideology propagated by the colonial government in the first place) came to be believed by the immigrant groups and the indigenous Malay group itself. On the other hand, the Chinese being left to self-government responded in ways which particularly emphasized their Chineseness – a trait that has had enormous implications in the contemporary society of the nation state, as my minority respondents have demonstrated (see Chapter 6.5).<sup>41</sup> Perceiving their socio-economic distance from other communities, race consciousness between them and the other groups became conspicuously significant. The Indians not being able to assert themselves politically or economically did not pose a threat to both the Chinese and the Malays and were content to maintain an isolated existence.<sup>42</sup> As a result of the British superimposition of class distinctions on racial groups during the colonial period, race rather than ethnicity has come to be accepted as the meaningful basis for social interaction in contemporary Singapore. Under these conditions, it can be

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<sup>39</sup> Francis G Carnell, *Ethnic and Cultural Pluralism in Burma, Thailand and Malaya* (International Institute of Differing Civilizations, Ethnic and Cultural Pluralism in Inter-tropical Communities, Report of the XXX Meeting held in Lisbon from 15-18 April 1957), Bruxelles, 1957, 409.

<sup>40</sup> W M Murphree, “Sociology and the Study of Race: Contemporary Perspectives for Southern Africa (Unpublished paper read at the General Meeting of the ASSA, Durban, July 1974): 15.

<sup>41</sup> A fuller discussion on ‘Chineseness’ in the nation state is at Chapter 6.5.

<sup>42</sup> Rajeswary Ampalavanar, *The Indian Minority and Political Change in Malaya 1945-1957*, (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1981), 60.

argued that ethnicity may be seen, in the words of Abraham, “as a manipulation of social reality transforming itself into perceptions of race”.<sup>43</sup>

Works by several historians reveal that colonial policies created limited opportunities for integration between these communities. Except for a small number of children who attended English language schools in the urban areas, most children studied in vernacular schools that only promoted their cultural homogeneity. In the eyes of the colonial administration education was a possible source of social discontent and therefore not given much support. Consequently, very few Chinese (and to some extent Indians) were allowed to participate in administrative roles in the government. Criticizing this policy, George Maxwell, a senior colonial civil servant, had this to say: “The policy of keeping non-Malayans out of the administration owes its inception to British officials.”<sup>44</sup> Given the hostility expressed by many colonial officials especially towards the Chinese and the lack of physical and social integration, it is not surprising that Malays perceived the Chinese with increasing racial contempt, perceiving their own economic backwardness as related to socio-cultural factors. This has led Nagata to observe that “some Malays even go as far as to suggest that the aspiring Malay businessman should become more like the Chinese”.<sup>45</sup>

Furnivall in his seminal work on colonial policy and its implementation in Singapore/Malaysia, describes the social and economic landscape in which each ethnic group was accorded a specific place in the following words:

different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market place, in buying and selling... . Even in the economic sphere there is a division of labor along racial lines. Natives, Chinese, Indians and

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<sup>43</sup> Abraham, *The Naked Social Order*, 16.

<sup>44</sup> George Maxwell, “The Mixed Communities of Malaya,” *British Malaya* (February 1943): 118.

<sup>45</sup> Judith Nagata, “Perceptions of Social Inequality” in *Pluralism in Malaysia: Myth and Reality* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 131.

Europeans all have different functions, and within each major group, subsections have particular occupations.<sup>46</sup>

Taking Furnivall's argument that this kind of plural society divided by racial cleavages is a creation of colonialism, it becomes clear that the attachment of 'race' to both occupation in the colonial economy and the plural character of a migrant society made it difficult to dislodge 'race' consciousness and cultural exclusiveness so deeply entrenched in the minds and bodies of such a population. The effect of colonial rule was to increase the social and cultural distance between the various communities, presenting them with few opportunities for inter-ethnic integration and creating instead suspicion and antagonism, especially between the Malays and Chinese. The Chinese and Indians also looked down on the Malays, and the Malays in turn resented the wealth of the Chinese and Indian migrants who had become prosperous through business and the professions. The outbreak of war and subsequent Japanese occupation of Singapore from February 1942 to September 1945 was another factor contributing to racial divisiveness.<sup>47</sup> Though the concept of ethnicity displaced the notion of 'race' as a descriptor of difference from the 1920s and has gained acceptance especially by the West in the 1960s, the British administration pursued their relentless 'racial' ideologies in Singapore until independence.<sup>48</sup>

By their actions and words then, the legacy of the colonial establishment has been to inscribe 'racial' groups as the main structuring principle of the organization of contemporary Singapore society. This was achieved through the implementation of an ideology of 'racial' differences leading to race consciousness and racial polarization. Colonial rule had therefore ensured that 'race' became the only "meaningful basis for social interaction" by compressing "two principles of social division, race and ethnicity... into one" such that 'race' superseded ethnicity in local terminology though these terms are both seen as synonymous.<sup>49</sup> Consequently Singaporeans see it as normal to regard themselves and the other groups as 'races', a

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<sup>46</sup> Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 304-305.

<sup>47</sup> This was because of discriminatory treatment by the Japanese towards the various communities, the Chinese being particularly targeted by them because of old rivalries.

<sup>48</sup> Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*. 14-23.

<sup>49</sup> Abraham, *The Naked Social Order*, 433; Robert Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1972), 117.

phenomenon that is as pervasive and entrenched in the psyche of Singaporeans today as it was in the colonial times. The roots of contemporary ethnic divisions and tensions have therefore been created by British economic and segregationist policies formed during the colonial era as I have demonstrated in this chapter. What became the order of the day through subsequent political independence was the institutionalization of 'race' as an accepted facet of Singapore society, even though this word, because of its negative connotations, had been universally relegated in favour of ethnicity.

#### **5.4 Emergence of Ethnicity**

Race as a biologically based category became increasingly questioned especially in the West and, in the 1920s, the notion of an ethnicity-based paradigm displacing 'race' emerged among social scientists to describe differences between people.<sup>50</sup> This transition was the result of worldviews that saw 'race' as scientifically and biologically oriented and ethnic groups as socially, politically and culturally constructed based on behavioral patterns and on the establishment of differences or boundaries. Eric Wolf says that the notion of ethnicity in the United States came into vogue by a gradual paradigm shift from 'race' to 'culture' then to ethnicity, a shift given prominence largely by writers like Fredrik Barth.<sup>51</sup> Following Weber, Barth had ushered in the beginnings of ethnicity as a social constructionist model. Barth proposes that ethnic groups are socially constructed and that the physical and ideological contents of a group's cultural characteristics cannot be seen in isolation.<sup>52</sup> The significance of Barth's theory is that it points to the basic foundation of identity, namely the establishment of group differences.

Ethnicity has been defined by several writers as referring to a self-conscious group of people united, or closely related, by shared experiences and considering themselves and being considered by others as different from other groups. Different

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<sup>50</sup> Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 14-23. They argue that ideas about 'race' have passed through three chronological phases, the initial phase when 'race' was constructed as a biological category, and then from the 1920s when ethnicity-based approaches began relying on social and cultural differences of groups.

<sup>51</sup> Eric Wolf, "Perilous Ideas: Race, Culture, People," *Current Anthropology*, 35 (1994): 1-12; Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Universitets Forlaget/ Allen and Unwin: Bergen/London, 1969).

<sup>52</sup> Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.

languages, geographical origins, religious beliefs, customs and traditions become a self-perpetuating quality and are passed on by the group from one generation to the next. Ethnicity is now regarded as something everyone has, not just 'others', and difference is seen as important to the creation of who we are. Anthropologists have also widened the idea of ethnicity whereby ethnic groups are incorporated into states to form a 'nation'. Glazer and Moynihan have pointed out that the term ethnicity was not widely used until the 1960s, as evidenced by its appearance for the first time in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* in 1961 and other major dictionaries in subsequent years. By 1973, it was included in the *American Heritage Dictionary* with the following definition: "1. The condition of belonging to a particular ethnic group; 2. Ethnic pride".<sup>53</sup> This does not mean that ethnic groups have not existed in the past, but rather that they have taken on a new significance in the post-colonial period as the developing nations of the world like Singapore attempt to define their own identity and the peoples within them claim certain rights on the basis of their belonging to a separate group.

## 5.5 The Relationship between Race and Ethnicity

The relationship between race and ethnicity over the years has been difficult and contestational, with the biological concept of race being confused with the cultural concept of ethnicity. British anthropologist Michael Banton who has consistently explored and theorized the two concepts and the relationship between them sums up the essential difference between an ethnic group and a 'race': "the former reflects the positive tendencies of identification and inclusion whereas the latter reflects the negative tendencies of dissociation and exclusion". He argues that 'race' is a categorical identification denoting 'them' based on physical or phenotypical characteristics, and is often a label - usually having negative connotations - imposed on others by a more powerful group. Ethnicity on the other hand is the cultural group identification of 'us' based on cultural differences or boundaries rather than innate biological traits.<sup>54</sup> From this point of view ethnicity is

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<sup>53</sup> See introduction by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, eds. Glazer and Moynihan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 1.; Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, 9-38.

<sup>54</sup> Banton, *Racial and Ethnic Competition*, 1-14; *Racial Consciousness* (London and New York: Longman, 1988), 1-15.

seen as dependent on group and cultural identification, while race is a matter of social categorization bound up with power relations whereby one group successfully imposes its categories of ascription upon another set of people. Ethnicity is thus internally defined to mean inclusion, that is, it is voluntarily embraced by a group or groups of people who define their own identity not based on physical features but on certain geographical, cultural or religious characteristics, while 'racial' identifications are externally defined to mean exclusion, that is, imposed by those in a position of dominance on other people. As Banton says, "membership in an ethnic group is usually voluntary, membership of a racial group is not".<sup>55</sup> Identifications of race are based on categorization as well as in ascription and imposition rather than group identification and subscription, as the situation in Singapore represents.

However Banton's theory has been increasingly questioned by scholars over the years on the basis that there is a family relationship between race and ethnicity.<sup>56</sup> Richard Jenkins argues that group identification and social categorization are already inextricably linked and implicated in each other, an argument finding resonance in the writings of many others.<sup>57</sup> According to Handelman, race is a potent example of a hierarchically dominant ethnic category.<sup>58</sup> Nathan Glazer maintains that race and ethnicity "form part of a single family of social identity".<sup>59</sup> Sandra Wallman dismisses the debate about the distinction between race and ethnicity as a "quibble", in later years arguing that phenotype or physical appearance is also a potential ethnic boundary marker among many.<sup>60</sup> Similarly Erikson takes the position that race may or may not form part of ethnic ideologies and that it does not appear to be a decisive factor in interethnic relations.<sup>61</sup> Van den Berghe argues that race has become nothing

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<sup>55</sup> Banton, *Racial and Ethnic Competition*, 10.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London: Routledge, 1996); Sandra Wallman, "The Boundaries of Race: Processes of Ethnicity in England," *Man*, 13 (1978): 200-17; T H Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 1993).

<sup>57</sup> Jenkins, *Social Identity*.

<sup>58</sup> D Handelman, "The Organization of Ethnicity," *Ethnic Groups*, 1 (1977): 193.

<sup>59</sup> Nathan Glazer, "Blacks and Ethnic Groups: The Difference and the Political Difference it makes" in *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*.

<sup>60</sup> Sandra Wallman, "The Boundaries of Race", 205; "Ethnicity and the Boundary Process in Context", 229, in *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations*, eds. J Rex and D Mason (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>61</sup> Erikson, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 5.

more than a “special marker of ethnicity”.<sup>62</sup> A similar perspective is offered by Floya Anthias who says that “race categories belong to the more encompassing category of ethnic collectivity”, and suggests that race is simply one way in which ethnic boundaries are constructed.<sup>63</sup> Smedley argues that race and ethnicity “can, and often do, accompany and complement each other” along with racist stereotypes.<sup>64</sup>

The various arguments advanced recognize that the socially constructed concepts of race and ethnicity though qualitatively different, appear to have a relationship that results in a certain overlap. This is particularly true of the Singapore situation where the term ‘race’ often used by post independent political leaders, and enshrined in the daily lives of Singaporeans, is used synonymously with ethnicity, suggesting that physical or phenotypical characteristics of peoples are linked to their cultural attributes and therefore group identification goes hand in hand with social categorization. The ethnic group does not have to be a ‘race’ in the sense that it is seen by others as somehow inferior, though there is a very strong overlap and groups that organize themselves ethnically are often regarded by other groups and the state as a ‘race’, as the position is in Singapore society. The nation state adopted the definition, concept and management of ‘race’ from the British and infused it into state ideology and in administrative practice by linking it to its own definition, concept and management of ethnicity in the enforcement of its vision of ‘multiracialism’ and ‘multiculturalism’. This project of nationalism is anchored on the acceptance, maintenance, and celebration of difference as a means to create a sense of national identity.

## **5.6 ‘Race’, Ethnicity and the Nation State**

As I have described above, present-day ‘racial’ categories in Singapore arose from British colonial ideology and practice which helped define the names and boundaries of groups. How this insistence and application of the notion of ‘race’ (as opposed to ethnicity) by the post-colonial nation state came about will now be analysed.

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<sup>62</sup> Van den Berghe, *Race and Racism*, 240.

<sup>63</sup> Floya Anthias, “Connecting ‘Race’ and Ethnic Phenomena,” *Sociology*, 26, (1992): 421.

<sup>64</sup> Smedley, *Race in North America*.

The move towards independence, coming on the heels of World War II, was a time of great global upheaval. Decolonization of other countries in Asia and Africa at this time, along with the emergence of new social movements in the West in the 1960s led to an ethnic revival and celebration of cultural roots worldwide. Consequently, the negative connotations attached to the colonial usage of the word 'race', denoting superiority of one group over another based on scientific and biological theory, made way for the widespread adoption of ethnicity in the West. 'Race', as biologically determined, became no longer an appropriate or viable category. Yet the government of the new nation state of Singapore chose to articulate its visions for a nation composed of 'races' from the very first day of independence and ever since. How has 'race' functioned to preserve and develop these articulations, why has 'race' been so highly prized and politicized in Singapore, and what is the state's attitude to 'race' and race relations?

At the end of the colonial period several extremely important factors were present in Singapore society and confronting the new government. Firstly, the various communities, both immigrant and indigenous, were diasporic, diverse in content and character, and divided sharply by language, culture, religion, ethnicity and geography. They were ethnocentric, had little unity between them, had not gone through a shared nationalist struggle for independence and hence there existed little sense of a new national identity that would help create an 'imagined' community.<sup>65</sup> Secondly, economic policies, necessitated by entrepot trade and the development of a port economy, had promoted growth through the colonial period and this scenario represented the mechanism for an independent Singapore that now had to contend with no trading hinterland or natural resources on attaining independence. Thirdly, to justify its existence the government had to improve living conditions because the colonial administration had left behind massive socio-economic problems such as unemployment, poor housing and insufficient education. Fourthly, the new government desired to secure political support and credibility, build ideological consensus, and transform the fragmented population into a disciplined and united workforce. Finally and most significantly, the new state was convinced that a new nation had to be forged with a common consciousness and a sense of national identity

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<sup>65</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 115.



that extended beyond just meeting the immediate and more long-term material needs of the people.

These factors were compounded by two other inherent and hugely significant criteria derived from the colonial administration that deserves special mention here. As recounted earlier, importing labour migrants from China and India during the colonial period - as well as indigenous peoples from the peninsula states of Malaya and the surrounding Indonesian islands of Sumatra and Riau - had led to the creation of separate and segregated socio-economic communities. Faced with the increasing legitimacy of 'racial' theory and a hitherto unknown mass of diverse peoples, colonial authorities sought to make sense of them and impose some sort of social order through a simplified 'racial' classification as described earlier in this chapter. The British had also left each 'race' to handle its own problems and, in a similar way, the nation state has perpetuated this practice by promoting self-help groups for the various communities (see Chapter 8.2). Such segregation and divisive strategies, it can be argued, have resulted in a plural society with clear-cut boundaries, a scenario that the nation state deals with through a discourse of ethnicity management linked to its ideology of 'multiracialism' and multiculturalism.<sup>66</sup>

The other major factor that contributed to shaping the state's attitude towards 'race' relations after independence in 1965 has been the 'Chineseness' of Singapore society since colonial days (see Chapter 6.5). 'Chineseness' has continued to be a key factor in shaping the policies of the state. Whether it is language, culture, national or political affiliations or economics, this factor has greatly affected the state's attitude towards 'race' and national identity since independence. Clammer, in particular, argues that "it is an especially Chinese characteristic to put great emphasis on 'race', although the idea is much weaker amongst the other groups in Singapore".<sup>67</sup> Hence the idea of 'race' is given such prominence in Singapore. How did this situation come about?

British colonial expansion had provided excellent opportunities for the early Chinese traders, artisans and labourers to move to Singapore on a transient basis, but with increasing economic success more and more of them decided to settle permanently in Singapore. Within ten years of the founding of Singapore, the

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<sup>66</sup> Ackerman, *Ethnic Identity by Design or Default*.

<sup>67</sup> Clammer, *Race and State in Independent Singapore 1965-1990*, 45.

Chinese had become the largest group and by 1931 constituted 74.3% of the total Singapore population.<sup>68</sup> In the eyes of the colonial administration they had acquired a position of some pre-eminence as they were looked upon as an economically forward community possessing “industry and economic genius”, in sharp contrast to the Indians’ ability to “labour”, and especially the Malays who were considered laid-back, “lazy” and economically backward.<sup>69</sup> Such stereotypes had led to ‘racial’ tensions and anti-Chinese resentment mainly from the Malays before the Second World War, increasing during and persisting after the war. There were also racial cleavages between the various communities that led to racism and ‘racial’ stereotypes not only from the colonial administration but also between the various communities (see discussion of stereotypes earlier in this chapter). These communities, particularly the Chinese, had also been harshly treated by the Japanese during the war partly because of the long-standing enmity between China and Japan. Such discriminatory Japanese policies towards the different groups had intensified ‘racial’ tensions among the Malays, Chinese and Indians, especially between the Malays and Chinese. For instance, the largely Chinese anti-Japanese resistance fighters took revenge against some Malays whom they accused of collaborating with the Japanese. Such ‘racial’ tensions were later to become accentuated in the 1960s during the acrimonious debate over Chinese-Malay equality in the newly formed Malaysian Federation, leading to communal rioting in 1964 between these two groups, all of which increased political and ‘racial’ tensions and eventually led to Singapore’s separation from Malaysia and consequent independence in August 1965. This traumatic severance of Singapore from Malaysia forever marked the political and social landscape of Singapore in terms of communal politics and ‘race’ relations. ‘Racial’ (and ‘class’) tensions were also simmering between the indigenous Muslims and the Chinese minority in Indonesia. Given such regional sensitivities, the new government realized that a Chinese nation would not be readily accepted and that the ‘Chineseness’ of Singapore had to be deemphasized.

Given this intensity of ‘racial’ pluralism in Singapore and in the region, multiracialism through meritocracy was therefore seen by the government of the new nation state as the most practical, pragmatic and feasible national ideology to adopt,

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<sup>68</sup> Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

<sup>69</sup> C A Vlieland, *British Malaya: A Report on the 1931 Census and on Certain Problems of Vital Statistics* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1932), 8.

the urgent need being to construct a Singaporean identity out of disparate communities and to diffuse ethnic tension.<sup>70</sup> The state therefore implemented a strategy to integrate the ‘nation’ so as to ensure racial harmony and the development of a modern, capitalistic economy. The project of ‘multiracialism’, this term often being used interchangeably with ‘multiculturalism’ in state discourse in Singapore, is anchored in the belief that the different ‘ethnic’ groups had a right to remain distinct without having to shed their ‘ethnic’ heritage and identity. ‘Multiracialism’, along with multiculturalism, multilingualism, multireligiosity and meritocracy, was therefore promulgated as a social formula to forge a single national identity out of a population divided along ‘racial’, religious, language and cultural lines and holding emotional ties to the countries they came from.<sup>71</sup> In accordance with this ideology of the nation building project the nation state has imagined and officially recognized four separate but equal ‘races’ – Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others – to co-exist without discrimination. The Chinese (C) make up 77% of the population, Malay (M) 14%, Indian (I) 8%, and Others (O) 1%.<sup>72</sup> ‘Others’ is a residual category for those not belonging to the first three, and consists of small and diverse communities such as ‘Eurasian’, Armenian, Arabic, Japanese, Jewish and other types of Europeans. This quadrotomy attempts to capture the diverse population into four simple boxes and is presented by the state as the most commonsensical representation of the population. This simplified ‘racial’ classification has been popularized as the ‘CMIO’ ideology of multiracialism and has guided the government’s multiracial, multicultural, multilingual, multireligious and meritocracy policy in many areas of the nation building project, especially in various education, housing, defence, social and family policies (see Chapters 6-8). Such policies are legitimized by claims of pragmatism,

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<sup>70</sup> Meritocracy as meaning application of merit, rather than racial, ethnic, religious or cultural favouritism. This ideology has arguably created a merit-oriented culture through the education system by producing a technocratic elite. See Chapter 7.2 for a fuller discussion of meritocracy.

<sup>71</sup> Geoffrey Benjamin, “The Cultural Logic of Singapore’s Multiculturalism” in *Singapore: Society in Transition*, ed. Riaz Hassan (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), 115-133; Sharon Siddique, “Singaporean Identity” in *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, eds. K S Sandhu and P Wheatley (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 365.

<sup>72</sup> Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore: Population Census 2000. This racial balance has been predominantly maintained since colonial times and has contributed to the growth and prosperity of Singapore. However, at certain times it has also been the source of conflicting ideals – arguably a natural phenomenon when ‘race’, ethnic identity and national identity evolve into inter-dependent factors.

economic survival and a nervous appreciation of lack of space that reinforce the quadrotomy. Chua argues that state ideology has been couched within the terms of a discourse on 'national survival'.<sup>73</sup>

Singapore leaders spearheaded by its first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and ably supported by cohorts like S Rajaratnam, Goh Keng Swee, Toh Chin Chye, Lim Kim San and a few others explicitly rejected the ideology of assimilation or the 'melting pot' based on the dissolution of group identity, which was the global trend prior to the sixties. As a team they determined the nature of Singapore's democracy and governance, and devised policies to promote rapid economic progress and prosperity. Together they agreed to establish Singapore as a multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious entity and treat it as constituting the core element of their strategy for nation building - the management of the new island state's extreme ethnic diversity. They offered the vision of a multiethnic society whose component 'ethnic' groups shared equal participation and acceptance within the ideological boundaries of the nation state, while at the same time guaranteeing autonomy and equality of status with regard to culture, language and religion to all ethnic segments so as to ensure that these segments could retain their distinct languages, religions and customs.<sup>74</sup> "Rather than seeking harmony through the abolition of ethnicity", the state decided to "set about not only enhancing ethnicity as a primary social identification", but also to "extend this principle to making ethnicity the main form of socio-cultural classification".<sup>75</sup> It adopted an instrumentalist view of 'ethnicity' by enforcing the notion of what Manchester School's Abner Cohen calls "political ethnicity", that is, ethnicity as a strategy for corporate action.<sup>76</sup> The rationale for "political ethnicity" as

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<sup>73</sup> Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>74</sup> Such a platform for nation building was possible because the Chinese then did not constitute a major force or dominant position within the PAP. In fact the largest organized support for the PAP came from unions of government employees, preponderantly Indian.

<sup>75</sup> John Clammer, *Singapore: Ideology, Society, Culture* (Singapore: Chopmen Publishers, 1985), 142. I have used the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' in accordance with the prevailing orientation of the people and the state. Semantic nuances be they 'race' or 'ethnicity' are a matter of indifference and irrelevance to many Singaporeans and even much less to the powers that be. The state and the people invariably use the word 'race' when referring to the various ethnic groups, but in a general context both terms are used synonymously. Historians too, I observe, do not sufficiently make a distinction between these terms.

<sup>76</sup> Abner Cohen, *Customs and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

perceived by my respondents goes beyond the means for corporate action – preserve and enhance the integrity of the dominant ethnic community which also happens to possess proven entrepreneurial skills. “It is a goal-directed ethnicity, formed by internal organizations and stimulated by external pressures and held, not for its own sake, but to defend an economic and political interest”.<sup>77</sup> The enunciated principles of a ‘multiracial’ policy also guaranteed the principle of meritocracy, ensuring equal rights to all individuals, as well as emphasizing economic success. Says Lai Ah Leng, “As a state strategy, the interplay of meritocracy, consensus and CMIO multiracialism has been a powerful weapon in promoting economic growth and socio-political equilibrium”.<sup>78</sup> Nation building therefore took a very ‘ethnic’ path during which various instrumentalist policies were executed by the Singapore state (see Chapters 6-8). As a result of this instrumentalist view, which has profound significance for this thesis, ‘ethnicity’ has been manipulated by the state so that it is subservient to the nation state. Brown calls this restructuring of ethnicity ‘corporatist’, while Clammer considers it as furthering the “authoritarian culture and social character” of the country.<sup>79</sup>

The new nation state also believed from the outset that the key to survival in a Muslim-dominated region lay in ‘racial’ cohesion through economic modernization. It realized quickly that national identity could only evolve in economic terms, both for national development as well as for improving the living conditions and material well being of its population. Economic development and material progress required a disciplined workforce and this was achieved by what sociologist Chua Beng Huat calls “a culture of capitalism” - a set of cultural attitudes and values like competition, meritocracy, excellence, pragmatism and ‘Asian’ communitarian values aimed at reducing differences between the various ‘ethnic’ groups and forging a single national

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<sup>77</sup> Cited in Marcus Banks, *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>78</sup> Lai Ah Eng, *Meanings of Multiethnicity: A Case-study of Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>79</sup> David Brown, “The Politics of Reconstructing National Identity: A Corporatist Approach,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 32, 2 (1997); Clammer, *Singapore: Ideology, Society, Culture*, 142.

identity for the separate but equal ‘races’, in other words, a set of national values over and above the values of ethnic groups.<sup>80</sup>

Such a form of ‘multiracial’ society has been articulated and perpetuated by the nation state over the years. Using different constructs the political leadership has always emphasized the word ‘race’ or ‘racial’ to underline its significance in the Singapore context.<sup>81</sup> Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, for example, in a speech titled “Building a multi-racial nation through integration”, spoke of his vision for building “a multiracial Singapore with four overlapping circles” (representing the various officially designated communities) to integrate “racial and religious harmony” and for the purpose of reconciling ethnicity with a national identity that supports and accommodates the diversity of ethnic identities and differences in their midst.<sup>82</sup> He said the area of overlap of the four circles was where Singaporeans “live, play and work together” with “minimal consciousness of ethnicity”. The presentation of group (or ethnic) identity was therefore uppermost in the minds of the nation state’s political leadership as it took office in 1965, despite its insistence of the concept of ‘race’ as the organizing principle of the plural society in Singapore.<sup>83</sup>

Chua Beng Huat argues that through the policy of multiracialism, “race is essentialized as an unchanging feature of the population so as to ground specific ways of disciplining the social body”, the racialised body becoming “part of the larger project of social control and state identity”.<sup>84</sup> The state maintains that ‘race’ is a potent symbol and a primary source of a person’s identity that will not be erased.

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<sup>80</sup> Chua Beng Huat, “Racial-Singaporeans: Absence after the Hyphen” in *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and Politics of Representation*, ed. Joel S Kahn (New York: St. Martin's Press; Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), 34.

<sup>81</sup> Initially, the notion of ‘race’ was used as part of the “social charter” for an essentially ‘multiracial’ Singapore (what Benjamin calls the ‘founding myth’ of Singapore), then ‘race’ became constructed as the defining principle of social classification in Singapore based on separate but ‘equal races’, and in the last two decades ‘race’ has veered to one of emphasis on Chinese culture, identity and superiority based on arguments of socio-biology.

<sup>82</sup> Goh Chok Tong, “Building a Multi-Racial Nation through Integration” (speech at the Second Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals, 5 November 2000) in *Speeches: A Bimonthly Selection of Ministerial Speeches [November-December]* (Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000): 16.

<sup>83</sup> Omi & Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*. 48.

<sup>84</sup> Chua Beng Huat, “Racial-Singaporeans: Absence after the Hyphen”, 34; Clammer, *Race and State in Independent Singapore 1965-1990*.

While the British classified the communities according to the country they came from (for example, the Indians from India, and the Chinese from China), and the language they spoke, the Singapore nation state has used this classification to construct and emphasise the concept of 'races'. The ethnic categories are represented by the 'race' of each member of the community. In this new milieu, 'race' has become a social concept that has served to construct Singaporeans as radically different from each other so successfully that most Singaporeans today have almost entirely internalized what was from the colonial days a highly arbitrary system of 'racial' and cultural hierarchies. 'Race' has been conceptualized and used to such an extent in the construction of Singaporean society that it is now a 'pervasive' reality in the social, cultural, economic and political life of Singaporeans.<sup>85</sup>

Essentialist categorization of racial identities in Singapore assumes fixed and rigid boundaries. Consequently each ethnic group is imagined by the state as homogeneous and unified. 'Race' is essentialized and institutionalized in the following manner. Each child is officially 'racially' classified at birth by being arbitrarily assigned the father's 'race' which would be Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Other, a nomenclature deeply rooted in the colonial past and perceived to originate from inherent biological differences between peoples.<sup>86</sup> The 'race' is inscribed on the birth certificate and subsequently on an identity card that all citizens must carry. Singaporeans are therefore not free to select the 'race' they belong to. One is therefore officially a Singaporean Chinese, Singaporean Malay, or Singaporean Indian, the term 'Singaporean' not threatening any of the individual cultures. However says Benjamin, "The constant reiteration of the Chinese-Malay-Indian... categorization in national censuses, in the reports of Government departments concerned with social policy, and in the schools puts considerable pressure on people to see themselves as ethnically defined".<sup>87</sup> An individual thus bears an indelible

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<sup>85</sup> Clammer, *Race and State in Independent Singapore 1965-1990*, 2.

<sup>86</sup> A child of mixed racial heritage also assumes the father's 'race' that is also identified with a language and a religion .

<sup>87</sup> Geoffrey Benjamin, "The Cultural Logic of Singapore's 'Multiracialism' ", 121. This emphasis on 'race' is manifested in various forms of government sponsored cultural entertainment including cultural shows and locally produced TV dramas. The cultural shows invariably consist of Chinese, Malay and Indian dancers and/or musical performances. This concern with ethnic representation is also seen in TV dramas which are almost always produced by 'racially' homogeneous casts, appropriate to the language used, and which rarely deal with anything other than domestic family issues.

imprint as a member of an officially designated 'race' from the cradle to the grave. 'Race' is therefore the basis of social and cultural classification of Singaporeans who are constantly reminded of their 'race' by being asked to classify themselves in various institutional forms and records. Consequently, 'race' is associated with a raft of state policies and regulations (see Chapters 6-8) that govern the daily lives of all Singaporeans. It is the way by which social difference in Singapore is reported and recognized for official purposes and is the process that seeks to privilege 'race' over all alternative forms of social identity.

Each 'race' is also identified with a language, a culture and a religion, the ideology of 'race' being articulated and manipulated as ethnicity by the state. Multiracialism, multilingualism, multiculturalism, multireligiosity and meritocracy are therefore the pillars of the national project. The social fabric of Singapore is therefore inextricably tied up with 'race' that is manifested in all activities of daily life and highly visible in the public sphere and built environment. This high visibility of 'ethnic' cultures is used to contribute directly to the formation of the Singapore nation state. Hence we have Chinese dances, Malay dances and Indian dances displaying the distinctive traditional cultures of the major 'ethnic' groups.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, cultural forms like songs, costumes, languages, food, religious/cultural festivals, TV and radio programmes, newspapers, 'race'-based self-help groups etc are all distinguished between and organized according to 'race' (see Plate 11).

'Racial' discourse through state-managed ethnicity is also present in everyday communication – in relation to identity of self and others, in food, culture, language, habits, transport, education, TV, newspapers etc. Similarly, festivals like Chinese New Year (for the Chinese), *Hari Raya Puasa* and *Hari Raya Haji* (for the Malays), *Deepavali* (for the Indians) and *Vesak Day* (for Chinese and Indian Buddhists) are declared public holidays in Singapore. The cultures of Singapore are therefore neatly packaged and frozen by the state in three respective 'race' traditions - an effect of the official 'multiculturalism' that is promoted by the government.

Yet at the same time the state also successfully introduced the teaching and use of English as a language to provide Singaporeans access to the global market and transform the island-nation into an attractive location for foreign investment. The introduction of English as the international language of technology and commerce

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<sup>88</sup> Examples are the Chinese lion dance, Malay *kompang*, Indian *bhangra* and Eurasian folk dance.



also allowed a politically and ‘racially’ neutral language to become the lingua franca of Chinese, Indian, Malay and other minority communities. The emphasis of English as a common language for national identity formation, concomitant with the government’s insistence on the capitalist orientation of its citizens towards the global economy also aimed at delimiting the meaning of ‘race’ in the Singapore context.

In keeping with the government ideology of multiracialism, a bilingual education policy of English and the “mother” tongue was introduced in all schools, whereby every student was required to learn English as the first language and his/her mother tongue (Chinese, Malay or Tamil) as the second language (Language and education policy is discussed in Chapter 7.3). These four languages were also accorded uniform treatment and declared official languages with English designed to promote interaction and communication between the various ethnic groups as well as becoming the dominant language of education, administration and commerce. Similarly, all schools became integrated to admit students from all communities, with all lessons being conducted in English and the mother tongue taught in a language class within the school curriculum. The government’s rationale for its language policy was based on social, political and economic concerns which justified the argument for an ‘Asian language’ as well as proficiency in English. The argument is that the importance of the mother tongue inevitably emphasizes ethnic culture, language being equated with the ethnicity that it gives. The implementation of second language education as a way to inculcate the young in school with proper “Asian” values would provide these young minds with the “cultural ballast” necessary to counteract Western cultural influences introduced through the use of English and brought on by the Republic’s modernization programme.<sup>89</sup> Former President Wee Kim Wee voiced the PAP Government’s concerns on this subject when he opened the Seventh Parliament on 7 June 1990:

This openness has ... also exposed us to alien lifestyles and values. Under this pressure, in less than a generation, attitudes and outlooks of Singaporeans, especially younger Singaporeans, have shifted. Traditional Asian ideas of morality, duty and society, which have sustained and guided us in the past, are giving way to a more westernized, individualistic and self-centered outlook on

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<sup>89</sup> On Singapore’s linguistic policies and the prevailing ideology of language, see Clammer, *Singapore: Ideology, Society, Culture*, 133-137.

life... the speed and extent of the changes in Singapore society is worrying. We cannot tell what dangers lie ahead, as we rapidly grow more westernized.

### **5.7 Race, Ethnicity and the People in the Nation State**

While it was the colonial regime that first introduced the concept of 'race' into the pluralistic society of Singapore, the nation state has for the purpose of administrative and political convenience continued this practice and made it a social and pervasive reality of everyday life. As Nirmala Purushotam has described, people were classified by the colonial administration into 'races' by census reporting, a practice that has been in force since 1871, and continues to this day in post independent Singapore.<sup>90</sup> Similarly the National Identity card that every resident in Singapore possesses classifies the individual by his/her 'race'. The identification of 'race' is a crucial part of a citizen's identity with a number of housing, educational, and employment consequences. As Benjamin says, it has long been at the root of Singapore's concept of 'multiracialism'.<sup>91</sup>

In Singapore people are socially defined by their 'race' because of their physical characteristics to which social attributes are linked – in other words, 'race' in Singapore cannot be understood as being based on skin colour alone because it has been socially constructed first by the colonial administration then subsequently by the postcolonial state. People are therefore conscious of the existence of 'race' and so organize their relationships with others on the basis of the 'racial' identity they attribute to others and to themselves. If they believe the others belong to a group that is genetically different from theirs, then they tend to fashion relationships with this group differently, as is illustrated by relationships between the dominant ethnic group, that is, the Chinese and the minority Indians, Malays and others. The point here is that people, rightly or wrongly, accept the biological aspect of other people as a reality and so act in accordance with their belief. Such beliefs make 'race' subjective and real – as real as people want it to be. No matter how offensive we may find 'race' and how unimpressed we are by scientific research disproving the biological aspect of race, race consciousness remains a powerful motivating force behind peoples' thoughts and behaviour, leading to processes of inclusion and exclusion.

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<sup>90</sup> Nirmala Purushotam, "Disciplining Difference: Race in Singapore".

<sup>91</sup> Benjamin, "The Cultural Logic of Singapore's 'Multiracialism'".

The nation state tends to emphasise cultural differences of different ethnic groups in Singapore to a point that distinguishes a particular group from the rest of the population. Such a scenario can be observed not only from the responses of my informants, but also over the years from stirrings of people from all ethnic groups who feel some sense of deprivation. The dominant Chinese group felt it in the years after independence when English was given importance to such a degree that this group became concerned that Chinese language and culture was being undermined by western influence - hence the introduction of Confucian ethics instruction in schools to emphasise the values of morality, the emphasis on the Speak Mandarin Campaign, and the introduction of other Chinese cultural manifestations. Such an emphasis on 'Chineseness' in the Republic in turn caused a certain amount of uneasiness on the part of the other communities, hence increased ethnic consciousness resulting in the state's policies of ethnic management for all ethnic groups.

Ethnicity in Singapore therefore appears as much a cultural and political phenomenon, ethnic groups reacting to particular conditions enforced by the state rather than a spontaneous stirring of people wanting to express themselves collectively. In sum, it can be argued that ethnicity in the Singapore concept encapsulates the various types of responses of different communities to the state's policies because of their respective subjective reactions to these policies. Also some communities, notably the Malays and Indians, perceive that the 'race'-conscious dominant community regards them as inferior and therefore organize themselves ethnically. In the process, ethnic groups regard each other as a 'race', a notion that has been perpetuated as a social reality by the colonial regime and later by the nation state. Being related to 'race', ethnicity is also connected to class, another factor contributing increasingly to the prospect of national consciousness and national identity becoming more elusive in Singapore society.

## **5.8 Conclusion**

After attaining independence the new nation wasted no time in promoting national identity, economic development and 'racial' harmony through a discourse of 'racial' politics centered on the ideology of 'race'. By doing so it has appropriated a 'racialised' colonial discourse that has been anchored to the central theme of multiracialism and with it a multicultural, multilingual and multireligious society, with the Chinese, Malays, Indians and other ethnic minorities enjoying autonomy and

equality of status in their culture, language and religion. ‘Race’ has therefore been socially constructed by the state as an everyday reality in the social, cultural, economic and political life of Singaporeans. State discourse therefore promotes national identity with ethnic identity as an essential ingredient. In the minds of Singaporeans these intersecting discourses coexist at different levels.

The three discursively produced groups – ‘Chinese’, ‘Malay’ and ‘Indian’ – “have become the relevant administrative racial categories that are used to rationalize government policies”, says Siddique.<sup>92</sup> These policies are a major factor in the continuation of ‘ethnicity’ as a socially constructed phenomenon in which the social, economic, cultural and political environment is closely intertwined at the level of everyday life. The government policies, bound up with high levels of state intervention and control, include a series of vigorous ‘race’-based ‘social engineering’ initiatives to promote national identity and ensure ‘racial’ harmony, and consequently economic success in line with its declared theme of multiracialism, and have been hegemonically masterminded by the nation state since independence (see Chapters 6-8). They have been harnessed by the state to the political process of nation building and have been the pillars of Singapore’s new physical, urban, social, cultural, political and cultural landscapes. The major social engineering instruments developed by the state include the education policy of bilingualism (English and the mother tongue), a high-rise public housing policy to supplant slum and squatter areas, family policies designed to stem both the birth rate and an ageing population, the institution of compulsory military service for defense and social cohesion purposes, as well as a self-help policy to assist the various ethnic communities. The ideology of the nation state for equal treatment of the various ethnicities is also manifested through heritage conservation to showcase the ethnic component of the multicultural heritage of Singapore. Ethnicity is offered as a tourist attraction, whereby ‘ethnic’ groups are seen to live happily together while preserving their separate cultural identities and practices. This is the official version of a Singaporean identity founded on racial ‘harmony’. The policies have significantly impacted the various ethnic communities in Singapore, and their effects on the Indian community will be analysed on the basis of interviews with my respondents in the ensuing chapters. Related to the nation state’s approach to ‘race’, a major consideration in the postcolonial Singapore context

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<sup>92</sup> Siddique, “Singaporean Identity”.

that conspicuously has not been given much prominence by Singapore anthropologists and historians is the connection between state-controlled ethnicity and the ideology of socio-biology. Clammer argues that the social construction of ethnic categories in Singapore, especially the flourishing of its Chinese manifestations, has its foundations in ideas about the genetic basis of 'race' that allows a certain discourse of 'race' to be promoted.<sup>93</sup> This subject will also be explored in juxtaposition with 'social engineering' policies in the chapters to follow.

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<sup>93</sup> Clammer, *Race and State in Independent Singapore 1965-1990*, 7.

## CHAPTER 6

### RACIAL POLITICS AND SOCIAL ENGINEERING – FAMILY, POPULATION AND ‘CHINESENESS’ POLICIES

“Singapore students rouse controversy by choosing Hitler as idol” – this breaking headline appeared conspicuously in *Japan Today* (July 1, 2005), a major Japanese newspaper. The news was also reported in the local media in Singapore and created quite a stir with the Israeli and German ambassadors intervening side by side with the Education Ministry.<sup>1</sup> According to the above sources, a group of eight high school students in Singapore sparked a storm of controversy after they chose Nazi Germany leader Adolf Hitler as their idol during a recent school outing. The group chose ‘Adolf Hitler’ as their group name and idol during a leadership camp excursion to Pulau Ubin, a small island off Singapore. Besides adopting the name of Hitler, the group had also prepared a placard, flaunted a photo of the German leader, and even demonstrated the Nazi salute with shouts of ‘Heil Hitler!’ Two weeks before the camp the group had been told to choose a name of a great leader and the teacher in charge apparently raised no objections when informed of the students’ choice. The newspaper also reported that none in the group had seemed embarrassed or uncomfortable with being associated with Hitler. Responses like: “He led Germany and was very good, although he was evil” and “His name symbolizes strength and loyalty, as people were very loyal to him” marked their perceptions of him. The incident sparked a knee-jerk reaction from many in Singapore, including the Ministry of Education as well as the Israeli and German embassies. In a letter to *The New Paper*, one reader, Michael Keogh, commented:

What annoyed me was how they treated Hitler with a couldn’t-care-less attitude. It was precisely that attitude that allowed Hitler to get into power. He talked about his programmes from the beginning but people just thought: ‘He’s a strong man, he can be good for us’ and made him their leader.

Expressing his anxiety, one teacher wrote in stating that students needed to be better guided: “History is about different perspectives from different authors, but the students have to choose a balanced view. If they do go astray and become too radical,

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Paper*, 25 June 2005.

teachers have to step in,” he said. While it was commonly felt by the Singapore public that this was an isolated incident involving essentially a small group of students who had acted in ignorance rather than with any intent to idolize Hitler, many were deeply concerned that such acts could have an effect on ethnic relations in Singapore. Voicing his concern, Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam agreed that the students should have shown more sensitivity. “Hitler had committed major crimes against humanity, racial crimes – something which our students should be very sensitive about, particularly given how much emphasis we place on racial harmony”, he said.<sup>2</sup>

## 6.1 Introduction

As I have argued in the previous chapter, the British introduced the ideology of ‘race’ and racial theory based on European ideas of biological inheritance/selection that resulted in an Orientalist discourse of superiority over the colonized. This colonial discourse of dominance drew heavily on essentialized notions of difference between colonizer and colonized based on perceived biological differences. On attaining independence the new nation state continued to use ‘race’ as a structuring principle of society by introducing the ideology of ‘multiracialism’ and hegemonically promoting ethnicity as an acceptable everyday reality in the lives of Singaporeans, the goal being to develop a unified Singaporean national identity in which the separate distinctive ethnic, linguistic and cultural identities of the various communities were retained and reinforced. ‘Racial’ politics has dominated the urban political economy of Singapore as the state pursues national developmentalism through the ideology of multiracialism, which, it insists, is basic to Singapore’s survival, economic growth and stability. As a result, Singaporeans have come to accept a racialized identity. Politically constructed through a combination of autocratic paternalism and hegemonic control, this identity has since independence been made the basis of various housing, health, education, language, defence, self-help, heritage conservation, population and family policies introduced by the state. Such initiatives were intended to ensure ‘racial’ harmony and economic success. They were the brainchild of a policy elite gathered around Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister from 1959 to 1990, under whose tutelage Singapore was transformed from a colony

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<sup>2</sup> *The New Paper*, 29 June 2005.

into a metropolis boasting one of the highest standards of living in the world.<sup>3</sup> His policies and programs have been the building blocks of Singapore's new physical, social, cultural and political landscapes, and have had a significant impact upon the various communities, especially in reinforcing 'racial' thinking and ethnic identity. In this chapter I will examine the policies relating to the family, the population and the 'Chineseness' of Singapore and the responses of Singapore Indians to the ways these policies have impacted them. Such responses illustrate how the Indians go about engaging and negotiating them in their everyday lives.

## **6.2 The Rationale for Race-based Policies**

An exploration of responses to these 'race'-based policies will hardly be complete if consideration is not given to contextualizing their development and the rationale underlying their implementation. In Chapter 5 I showed how during the colonial administration of Singapore the economic hierarchy of the three main population groups (namely, Chinese, Indians and Malays) was racialized. The Chinese were characterized as more intelligent, industrious, disciplined and economically pragmatic than either Indians or Malays. The latter suffered from negative stereotyping of their work ethic. Such stereotypes have persisted to the present day. They were, according to Michael Barr, a profound influence on the various social engineering policies and programmes implemented by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's administration, in particular its population and family policies.<sup>4</sup> Such policies have been related to, what Perry, Kong and Yeoh call, Lee's "nature more than nurture" theory for a "high quality" population – a concern that several writers have also articulated.<sup>5</sup> Tremewan, for instance, discusses Lee's policies of "sorting" society "according to natural ability", while Minchin, Tamney, Clammer, Trocki, and Chee and Chan are among others who have dealt specifically

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<sup>3</sup> Lee Kuan Yew was Prime Minister from 1959 to 1990 when he handed over the reins to Goh Chok Tong in a smooth power transfer.

<sup>4</sup> Michael D Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew: Race, Culture and Genes," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29, 2 (1999). Racial prejudices and economic hierarchy, it can be argued, feed on each other so that they are interconnected and closely linked. Consequently, it cannot be disputed that racial prejudices have contributed to perceptions of the economic abilities of the main ethnic communities, as much as the economic hierarchy has contributed to such prejudices.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Perry, Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State* (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 89.



with Lee's attitudes linking 'race' and genes.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one cannot appreciate the racialized nature of Singaporeans' perceptions without first understanding Lee Kuan Yew's views on 'race'.

Lee linked economic performance and intelligence to 'race' just as the British had done during the colonial period.<sup>7</sup> He was persistent in his observation that the Chinese were a "race" with a "more intense and exacting civic culture" conducive to economic development and commercial ability.<sup>8</sup> This was in sharp contrast to his view that the Malay and Indian cultures were "soft", "benign", "relaxed" and less demanding.<sup>9</sup> Of the Malays, he remarked that they "had always withdrawn from competition and never really entered into the mainstream of economic activity".<sup>10</sup> In a 1965 interview on Australian television, he compared the Chinese and Malays thus:

One is the product of a civilization which has gone through all its ups and downs, of floods and famine and pestilence, breeding a people with very intense culture, with a belief in high performance in sustained effort, in thrift and industry. And the other people, more fortunately endowed by nature, with warm sunshine and bananas and coconuts, and therefore not with the same need to thrive so hard. Now, these two societies really move at two different speeds.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Lee's perceptions about the inherent genetic strengths and weaknesses of the different 'races' reaffirmed his belief in Chinese racial and cultural superiority which formed the fundamental basis of his worldview in which 'race' was an all-pervasive feature of civilization. It is this attitude that is seen as having formed the

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<sup>6</sup> Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore* (London and New York: St Martin's Press, 1994), 102-104, 115; James Minchin, *No Man is an Island* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986; reprint, 1990); Joseph B Tamney, *The Struggle over Singapore's Soul: Western Modernization and Asian Culture* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 102-103; John R Clammer, *Race and State in Independent Singapore 1965-1990: The Cultural Politics of Pluralism in a Multiethnic Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1998), 160-164; Carl A Trocki, *Singapore: Wealth, Power and the Culture of Control* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 155; H L Chee and C K Chan, *Designer Genes*, eds. Chee and Chan (Petaling Jaya: Insan, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Ian Buruma, a Henry Luce Professor at Bard College in New York, writing in an article in *Time* magazine (2005), calls Lee Kuan Yew "one of the last proponents of social Darwinism".

<sup>8</sup> Lee as quoted in Tamney, *The Struggle over Singapore's Soul*, 102.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-102.

<sup>10</sup> Lee as quoted in Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew: Race, Culture and Genes," 17.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

basis of the various social engineering instruments of his administration, and which, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, resulted in the emphasis on Chineseness in the Republic.

According to Barr, Lee Kuan Yew's reading of the British historian Arnold Toynbee's "Challenge and Response" fermented his views on environmental and biological determinism and eugenics, and Lee acknowledged Toynbee as enabling him to rationalize Chinese racial and cultural superiority.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Barr claims that Lee began quoting Toynbee in Cabinet meetings as soon as the People's Action Party (PAP) came into power in 1959. Hence his comparison of the "more intense and exacting Sinic cultures of East Asia" with the "less demanding" values of the indigenous cultures of South and Southeast Asia which, he claimed, "accounts for the difference in industrial progress between Eastern and Southern Asia".<sup>13</sup> Barr, however, argues that in reading Toynbee, Lee developed a view of race on a narrower base of environmental determinism than that propounded by Toynbee.<sup>14</sup>

Another influential source for Lee was the Scandinavian social scientist Gunnar Myrdal who explains in his 'Asian Drama' why peoples in South and Southeast Asia – the "soft societies" – were subject to lower achievements.<sup>15</sup> Lee's belief in Chinese superiority was further enhanced by the Lamarckian<sup>16</sup> theory of evolution and he came to the conclusion that intelligence was 80% genetic while only 20% environmental.<sup>17</sup> The ideas of theorists like Jensen, Darlington, Eysenck and Burt relating to the "genes and intelligence" link (though the legitimacy of some of their ideas, especially of Burt, have been questioned and discredited) were also used

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<sup>12</sup> Arnold Toynbee, "Challenge and Response," in *The World and the West*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1953); Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew: Race, Culture and Genes," 10.

<sup>13</sup> Lee's commemorative lecture at Cambridge University quoted by Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew: Race, Culture and Genes," 11.

<sup>14</sup> Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew: Race, Culture and Genes," 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>16</sup> Famous French naturalist and zoologist Jean Lamarck who developed a theory of evolution in which he postulated that acquired characteristics can be inherited by later generations.

<sup>17</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, "The Education of Women and Patterns of Procreation," *Bulletin* (Singapore: Regional Institute of Higher Education and Development, August 1983); Clammer, *Race and State in Independent Singapore*, 162.

by the political leadership to justify government policies.<sup>18</sup> By directly associating ‘good’ glands or genes with ‘races’, Lee Kuan Yew expounded his view in a series of speeches in the 1960s, stating that people of “migrant stock” who come from harsher climates and who have inherited their ‘good glands’ from their parents pass them down through generations.<sup>19</sup> This helps to explain his admiration for the Chinese of Southeast Asia who supposedly have genes that are hardier, tougher, and more enterprising and innovative than the genes of indigenous peoples of this region. He captures the essence of this assertion with the following parable:

Three women were brought to the Singapore General Hospital, each in the same condition and needing a blood transfusion. The first, a Southeast Asian was given the transfusion but died a few hours later. The second, a South Asian was also given a transfusion but died a few days later. The third, an East Asian, was given a transfusion and survived. That is the X factor in development.<sup>20</sup>

Returning from a two-month tour of Australia and New Zealand in 1965, he extended his analogy to the tough migrant cultures of those countries and posited that Australia, New Zealand and Singapore had each produced societies with “a tremendous amount of enterprise” which he characterized as a “frontier spirit”.<sup>21</sup> In this way he attempted to put the Chinese on par with Northern and Western Europeans.

His association of ‘race’ with genes is also demonstrated when he proudly proclaimed, with reference to the Chinese in Singapore, that very few such cities on the equator – the climate and the stupor, the heat and the humidity notwithstanding – have the cultural verve and dynamism of a migrant community which have made this

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<sup>18</sup> Arthur R Jensen, *Genetics and Education* (London: Methuen, 1972); C D Darlington, *The Evolution of Man and Society* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969); Hans Jurgens Eysenck, *Race, Intelligence and Education* (London: Temple Smith Ltd., 1971); Cyril Burt's most famous work on the genetics of intelligence involved the study of twins. In a series of papers published between 1943 and 1966 Burt concluded that heredity plays a much more prominent role in the development of intellectual ability than does the environment. However, Eysenck, J Cohen and several other critics maintained that it was unlikely that Burt's studies (involving 53 sets of twins) suggesting a strong relationship between genetics and intelligence was accurate.

<sup>19</sup> Barr, “Lee Kuan Yew: Race, Culture and Genes,” 13.

<sup>20</sup> Lee as quoted in Barr, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Lee's speech at the Political Study Centre, Singapore, quoted in Barr, 14.

place throb with life and vitality.<sup>22</sup> Hence his claim that the Malay ‘race’ was unenterprising and backward unlike the Chinese whose superior genes were responsible for the economic success of the Chinese and consequently that of Singapore.<sup>23</sup> More and more Lee came to the conclusion that there was a link between the economic level of parents and the intelligence of children, leading Barr to conclude that Lee Kuan Yew was a ‘racist’, not only because he believed that “some races... were inherently superior to others” but also because he “integrated his racial views into his political agenda and created a regime which accentuate racial categorization”.<sup>24</sup> According to Barr, Lee’s environmental determinism, Lamarckian view of evolution and cultural eugenics theory formulated by a host of theorists all combined to form the rationale for the eugenics programme for Singapore by “tinkering” with the cultures of the ethnic communities and thereby creating “a society which has a relatively low level of racial tension, despite having a high level of racial consciousness”.<sup>25</sup> Lee’s ‘race’-based eugenics policies and the sinicization programme were directed to answering the challenges of Western cultural influence, degenerating genes and the search for talent to bolster Singapore’s economic performance. These policies and programmes, enforced through coercion and dialogue, form the basis of most of the significant social engineering instruments that have governed the daily lives of Singaporeans since Singapore’s independence.<sup>26</sup> Citizens born after independence are a complete product of these policies and programmes and their responses and reactions are also articulated in this and subsequent chapters.

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<sup>22</sup> Lee as quoted in Barr, 15. This is an interesting theory of vitalism that has long historic roots to eugenics.

<sup>23</sup> James Minchin, *No man is an Island*. The public image of Malays is of a people lagging behind the other ‘races’ in educational and economic achievement.

<sup>24</sup> Barr, “Lee Kuan Yew: Race, Culture and Genes,” 20-21.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> At this point it is pertinent to mention that the association of ‘race’ with socio-biology and scientific racism in the Singapore context has conspicuously been absent in the works of Singapore’s anthropologists, historians and social scientists. Though it is a practical reality in everyday Singapore, the theme of ‘race’ itself is a hugely sensitive subject in the eyes of the state. Consequently public utterances as well as academic and intellectual discourses on ‘race’ are frowned upon. Available literature on this controversial theme is therefore mainly from foreign sources.

Lee's eugenics theory was also responsible for the ideology of meritocracy that was one of the tenets enshrined in the state's founding themes. According to Tremewan, meritocracy institutionalized and "legitimated class hatred and racism" in Singapore because of the perceived connection between "intelligence, biological heredity and race or class".<sup>27</sup> Lee's belief that intelligence was hereditary was reflected in his perception that the working class who were breeding most in Singapore, namely the Malays and Indians, possessed low levels of intelligence unlike the middle and upper Chinese classes.<sup>28</sup> Hence his public references to working class Singaporeans as 'digits'.<sup>29</sup> In the rest of this chapter, I will explore the state's policies and programmes relating to the family, the population and 'Chineseness', as well as their relationship to 'race'. At the same time we need to interrogate these programmes' relationship with 'racial' identity, 'ethnic' identity and national identity by analyzing responses from my respondents.

### 6.3 Family policies

History in China is of dynasties that have risen and fallen, of the waxing and waning of society. And through all that turbulence, the family, the clan, has provided a kind of survival raft for the individual. Civilizations have collapsed, dynasties have been swept away by conquering hordes, but this life raft enables the civilization to carry on and get on to its next phase.

- Lee Kuan Yew<sup>30</sup>

This quote from a speech given by Lee in 1994 indicates the importance he placed on the family in Singaporean culture. Romance and love in family harmony have also featured prominently in Chinese culture. His eugenics theories had their greatest impact on family and population policies which, since the time of independence, were implemented by "a mixture of publicity, exhortation and material

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<sup>27</sup> Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, 102.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 115; Tables 9, 10, 11 and 13 show birth figures from Malays and Indians as compared to Chinese.

<sup>29</sup> T J S George, *Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1984), 132. 'Digits' is a term Lee Kuan Yew used to describe the working classes and minority 'races' who failed in the education system and therefore were considered to lack in natural ability. He felt that such people might yet be improved through social engineering.

<sup>30</sup> "A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew," *Foreign Affairs*, (March/April 1994), 15.

incentives and disincentives” to control the country’s rate of population growth.<sup>31</sup> It is in the eugenics programme that the techniques of the state’s hegemonic control and indoctrination reached their greatest heights. The mechanics of their implementation are first recounted here as a prelude to how they are linked to ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’.

With falling death rates and continued high birth rates and immigration since the end of the Second World War, the Singapore nation state in the seventies saw rapid population growth as a threat to living standards, economic progress and political stability. Various policies were initially introduced to reduce the birth rate including the setting up of a Eugenics Board as well as a Family Planning Board to authorize sterilizations. Abortion and voluntary sterilization were legalized in 1970. Between 1969 and 1972, a set of policies known as "population disincentives" were instituted to raise the costs of bearing third, fourth, and subsequent children. Civil servants only received paid two-month maternity leave for the first two children; maternity hospitals charged progressively higher maternity fees for each additional birth; and income tax deductions for more than three children were eliminated. Large families received no extra consideration in public housing allotments, and top priority in the competition for enrolment into Primary I in the most desirable primary schools was given only to children whose parents had been sterilized before the age of forty with no enrolment priorities for third and higher-order children. Voluntary sterilization was rewarded by seven days of paid sick leave and by priority in the allocation of such public benefits as housing, education, and the approval of work permits for foreigners wishing to marry Singaporeans and take up residence in Singapore. The policies were accompanied by publicity campaigns urging parents to "Stop at Two" and “Girl or boy – two is enough”, arguing that large families threatened parents' present livelihood and future security: “small families have more to eat”. The penalties weighed more heavily on the low income-earners, particularly the Malays, and were justified by the authorities as a means of encouraging the poor to concentrate their limited resources on adequately nurturing a few children who would be equipped to rise from poverty and become productive citizens.

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<sup>31</sup> Saw Swee Hock, “Singapore: Population Control Policies” in *Population Control for Zero Growth in Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989).

As a result of these measures, fertility declined throughout the 1970s, reaching the replacement level of 1.006 in 1975, and thereafter declining below that level.<sup>32</sup> While the fertility levels of the Malays and Indians stabilized at about the replacement level, the fertility rate among the Chinese continued to decline to a level substantially below replacement. While 76% of the population was Chinese in 1985, only 69% of the babies born that year were Chinese.<sup>33</sup> With fertility below replacement level, it was feared that the population would after some years begin to decline unless supplemented by immigration. Interestingly, low levels of population growth were also accompanied by increasing affluence, education, women's participation in paid employment, and control of infectious diseases. Table 3 below shows the rate of population growth over the years.

Table 3

Population and growth rate

Year	Total Population	Growth Rate (Percent)
Census		
1901	227.6	n.a.
1911	303.3	2.9
1921	418.4	3.3
1931	557.7	2.9
1947	938.1	3.3
1957	1,445.9	4.4
1970	2,074.5	2.8
1980	2,413.9	1.5
1990	3,047.1	2.3
2000	4,017.7	2.8

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

It is clear that government policies and publicity campaigns had combined with broader socioeconomic forces to promote later marriage and smaller families. Consequently, the government became alarmed by growing numbers of single

<sup>32</sup> Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

<sup>33</sup> Saw Swee Hock, *Changes in the Fertility Policy of Singapore* (Singapore: The Institute of Policy Studies, 1990).

women, a falling birth rate pursuant to a two-child family policy, and an ageing population, as the following tables show.<sup>34</sup>

#### Proportion of singles

Table 4

#### Proportion of female singles in age group 30-39

Total		Chinese		Malays		Indians		Others	
1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990
13.4	18.1	14.1	19.2	10.2	12.2	9.9	16.0	15.8	14.9

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

Table 5

#### Proportion of female singles in age group 35-44

Total		Chinese		Malays		Indians		Others	
1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
13.3	14.4	14.1	16.0	9.0	8.5	11.0	9.0	11.0	9.0

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

Overall the “singlehood” rate has been increasing further in the last two decades as the above tables show. At the key age group of 25-44 years, one in five females was still unmarried according to the Singapore Department of Statistics. Singlehood was most prevalent among graduate females and has been associated with greater participation in education and employment and correspondingly the increasing trend towards later marriage. The Chinese had higher proportions of older, unmarried females than the Malays and Indians, reflecting the trend towards late marriages among the Chinese. The Malays had the lowest proportion of singles in any age group. The above tables also show trends among different age groups between the census of 1980, 1990 and 2000.

#### Ageing population

The population had grown older in 2000 (the last census). Between 1980 and 2000, the median age rose from 24 years in 1980 to 34 years in 2000 as shown in Table 6 below.

<sup>34</sup> The state persisted with this policy long after the demographics had changed and later labour shortages were to emerge resulting in new race-based approaches to immigration – see discussion on population policy in this chapter (6.4).

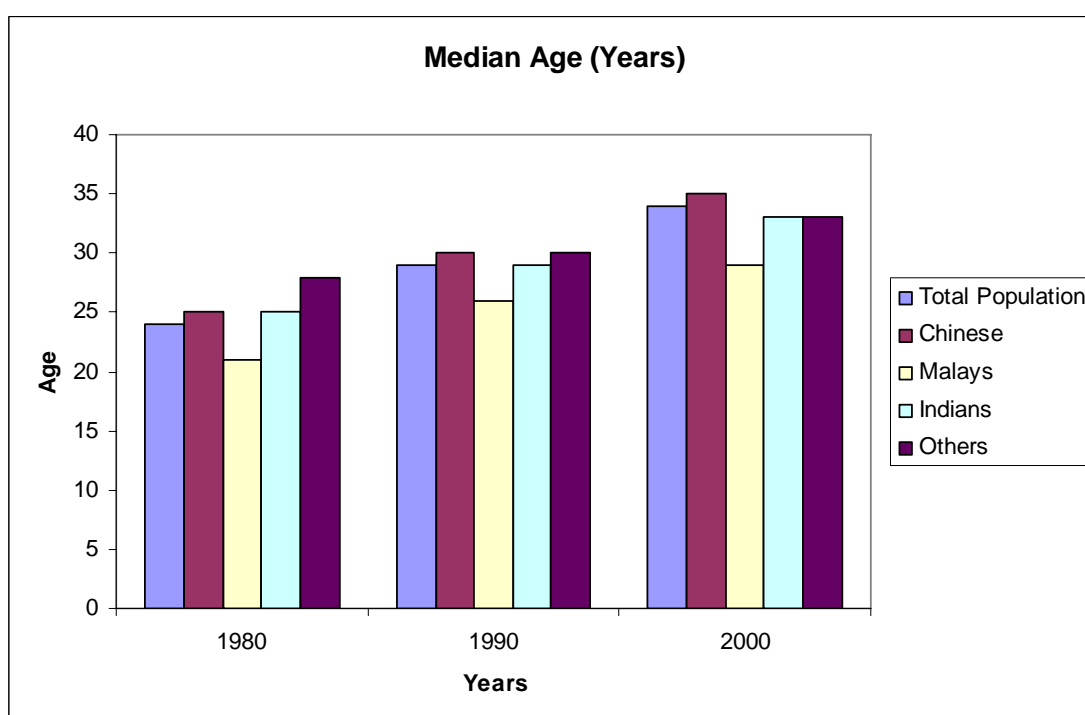


Table 6

## Median Age (years)

Total			Chinese			Malays			Indians			Others		
1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000
24	29	34	25	30	35	21	26	29	25	29	33	28	30	33

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.



Tables 7 and 8 below further indicate the ageing of the population between different age groups during the years 1980 to 2000.

Table 7

## Persons aged 60 years and over (percent)

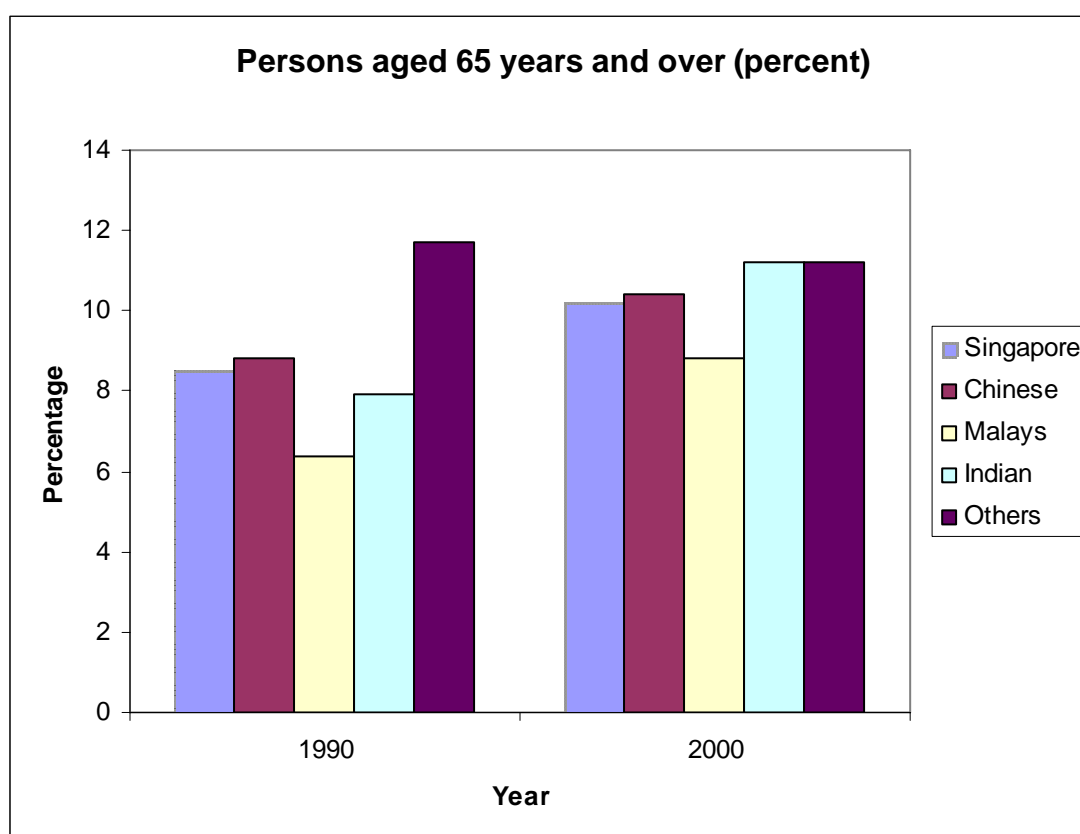
Total		Chinese		Malays		Indians		Others	
1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990
7.5	9.1	8.0	9.4	4.8	7.2	6.2	9.7	9.5	11.6

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

Table 8  
Persons aged 65 years and over (percent)

Total		Chinese		Malays		Indians		Others	
1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
8.5	10.2	8.8	10.4	6.4	8.8	7.9	11.2	11.7	11.2

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.



#### Fertility rate

While Table 9 below shows the overall decline in fertility rates for the whole population, Tables 10 and 11 show that the Chinese had the lowest fertility, the Malays highest and the Indians in between.

Table 9

## Total fertility rates

Age group (Years)	1994	1999	2000 (per thousand females)	2001	2002	2003	2004
15-19	7.4	8.4	8.8	8.4	8.4	6.6	6.5
20-24	46.9	37.2	42.2	35.7	34.6	32.3	32.1
25-29	129.1	105.0	110.0	96.1	91.4	81.9	80.2
30-34	109.1	97.5	107.7	94.6	95.9	88.3	88.3
35-39	42.6	38.5	43.3	39.4	38.0	35.5	34.8
40-44	6.7	6.4	7.6	6.8	5.8	6.0	6.2
Total Fertility rate	1.71	1.41	1.60	1.41	1.37	1.25	1.24

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

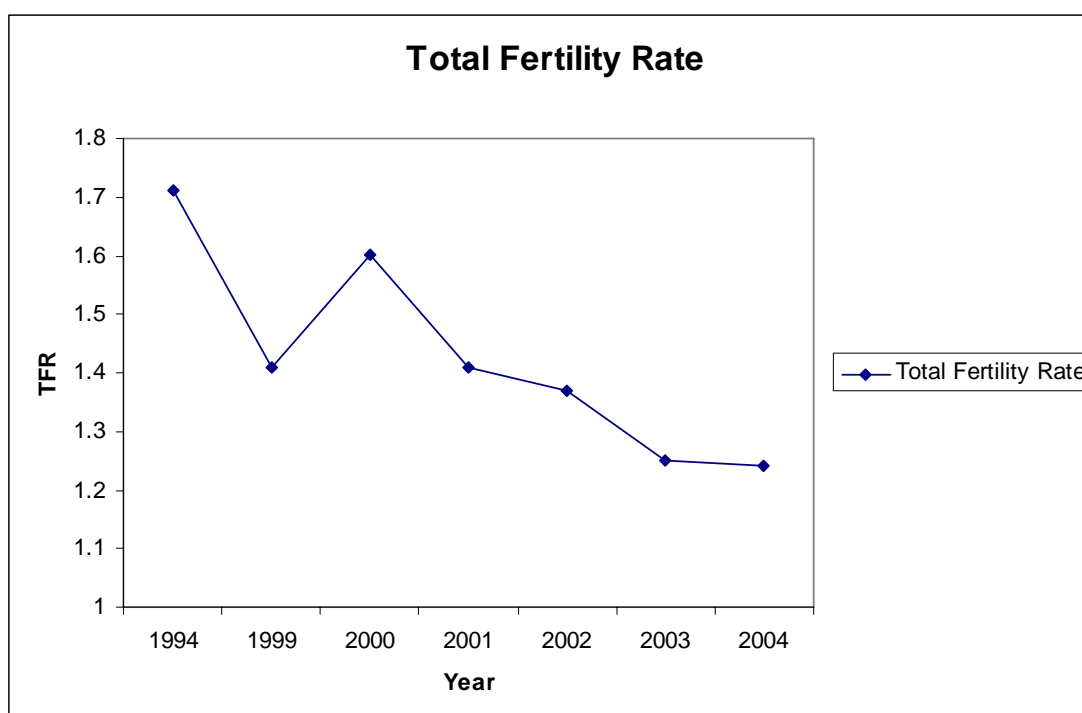


Table 10

Number of children born (per female)

Total			Chinese			Malays			Indians			Others		
1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000
3.4	2.9	2.5	3.4	2.8	2.5	3.9	3.2	3.1	3.4	2.7	2.4	2.8	2.3	2.0

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

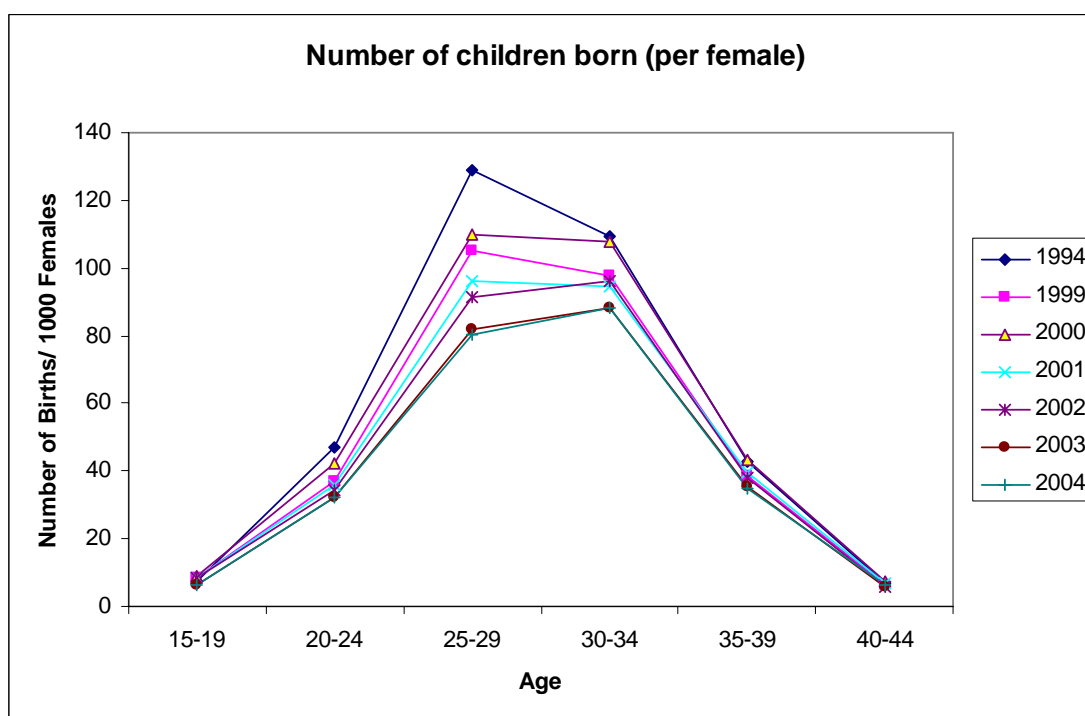


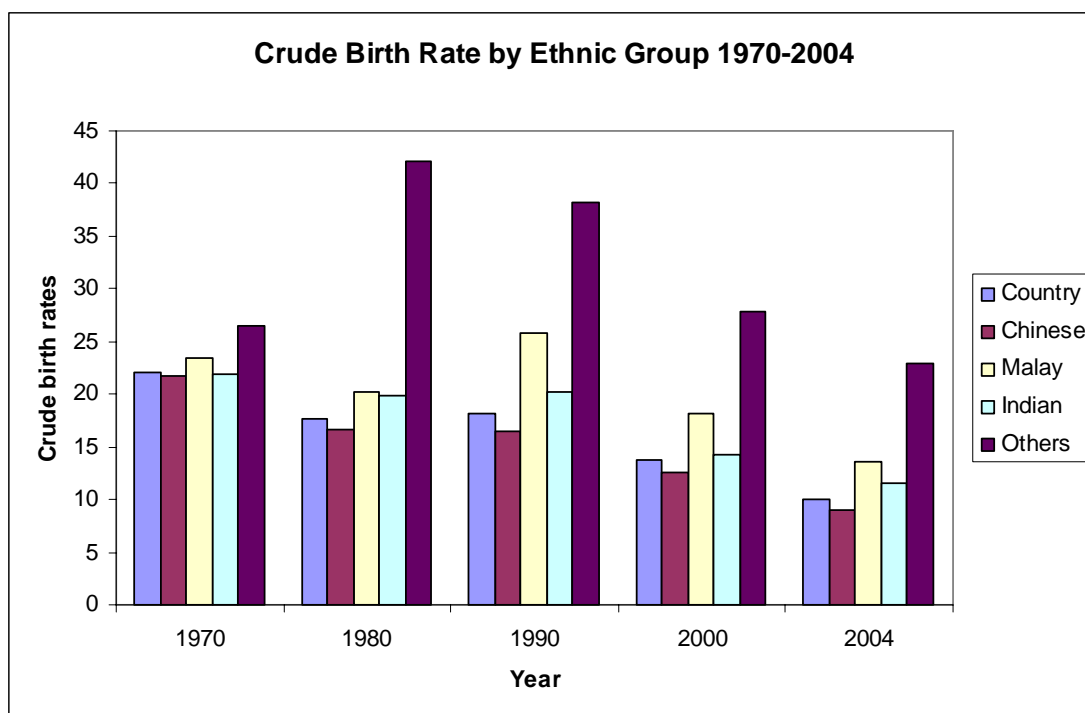
Table 11

## Crude birth rates by ethnic group 1970 – 2004

Year	Total	Chinese	Malays	Indians	Others
1970	22.1	21.8	23.5	21.9	26.5
1980	17.6	16.6	20.2	19.8	42.1
1990	18.2	16.4	25.8	20.2	38.2
2000	13.7	12.6	18.1	14.2	27.9
2004	10.1	9.0	13.6	11.5	23.0

Note: Crude birth rate refers to the number of live births per thousand population.

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.



Besides Others, Malays still registered the highest birth rate of 13.6 per 1000 residents followed by Indians of 11.5 per 1000 residents. Chinese registered the lowest rate of 9.0 per 1000 residents. According to the Department of Statistics, in terms of the proportion of mothers below 25 years of age, Malays were the youngest (26.1%), followed by Indians (17.0%) and Chinese (7.0%). The average family size had also become smaller, the Chinese having the smallest family size in 2000. The decline in

family size has been associated with the trend towards delay in marriages as Table 12 below shows.

Table 12

Average number of children born by ethnic group

Age	Chinese			Malays			Indians			Others		
	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000
Total	3.3	2.8	2.5	3.8	3.2	3.1	3.3	2.7	2.4	2.2	2.3	2.0
<30	2.9	0.9	0.6	3.3	1.3	1.4	3.0	1.1	1.0	1.8	0.9	1.0
30-39	5.2	1.8	1.6	6.8	2.4	2.4	5.9	2.0	1.9	3.9	1.6	1.6
40-40	8.9	2.6	2.1	11.8	3.5	2.8	9.3	2.9	2.2	5.8	2.2	1.9
>50	4.9	4.5	3.7	5.7	5.9	4.9	5.3	4.7	3.9	3.4	3.7	3.0

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

There was also a strong correlation between family size and educational level of the females. On average, university graduates in all age groups had the fewest children, largely due to late marriage among the graduates as Table 13 below shows.

Table 13

Average number of children born by highest qualification attained and age group of married females

Age	<Secondary		Secondary		>Secondary		University	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
Total	3.4	3.3	1.6	1.9	1.5	1.5	1.4	1.3
Below 30	1.2	1.3	0.9	0.9	0.6	0.6	0.4	0.4
30-39	2.1	2.1	1.7	1.8	1.5	1.5	1.4	1.3
40-49	3.0	2.4	2.1	2.1	2.1	2.0	2.0	1.9
50 & over	4.8	4.2	3.0	2.5	2.8	2.3	2.5	2.2

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

On average, university graduates had the highest proportion (28%) with no children or only one child. In 2000 married graduate females had 1.3 children compared with 2.1

children for those with below secondary qualifications. Women without any qualification had the highest fertility and those with tertiary qualification the lowest. More females were also marrying later than before. The delay in marriage occurred for females at all levels of qualification and in all the main ethnic groups over the years as Table 14 below shows.

Table 14

Average age at first marriage by year of marriage (years)

	1960	1961-70	1971-80	1981-90	1991-2000
<hr/>					
Ethnic group					
Chinese	20.7	23.3	24.3	26.1	26.9
Malays	17.7	19.9	21.7	23.5	24.8
Indians	18.0	20.3	22.1	24.0	25.3
Others	21.1	23.2	23.8	25.7	27.0
<hr/>					
Qualification					
<Secondary	20.0	22.4	23.6	25.3	26.9
Secondary	22.0	23.2	23.8	25.3	26.3
>Secondary	23.7	24.6	24.6	25.9	26.3
University	24.5	25.3	25.2	26.3	26.9

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

Age at first marriage is a key factor for fertility as women marrying in their teens have a longer reproductive life span than those marrying later. The trend towards marrying at an older age reflected the longer period spent in education, the gradual discarding of the traditional practice of early marriage, the increasing economic independence of females over the years as well as the rapid socio-economic development of Singapore.

It was clear that the population control programme instituted in the mid-sixties had succeeded beyond the state's anticipation, so that a situation was created whereby the replacement rate especially for the Chinese population had by the late 1970s declined drastically. Worse still was that the better-educated Chinese women were having fewer children, marrying later or not marrying at all. Male university graduates also compounded the problem by preferring less highly educated wives. Singapore was also experiencing the lowest birth rates since independence among all three major

ethnic groups. Typically exhibiting a concern with breeding and with Singapore's better educated and wealthier Chinese majority which was neither replacing itself nor raising the quality of "racial" stock, Lee warned the nation in his 1983 National Day message that

If we continue to reproduce ourselves in this lopsided way, we will be unable to maintain our present standards. Levels of competence will decline. Our economy will falter; administration will suffer; and society will decline.

He continued by saying:

If you don't include your women graduates in your breeding pool and leave them on the shelf, you would end up a more stupid society.... So what happens? There will be less bright people to support dumb people in the next generation.

Later, in a 1990 speech, he spoke of it as a dilemma because it meant that "50% of graduate girls will either marry down, marry foreigners, or stay unhappy". The state contended that graduates in particular produced brighter and more intelligent babies and therefore were more likely to be capable of parenting given their scholastic merits – hence an overwhelming emphasis on academic qualifications in Singapore's meritocracy drive.

The government therefore acted by introducing new eugenics policies and, although these policies appeared non-racial, they were in fact racially targeted in favour of the Chinese. Table 15 below shows graduate levels according to ethnicity, with the Chinese graduate population showing marked increases over the years when compared with Indian and Malay graduates. The increases among the Chinese have meant a corresponding reduction in their female graduates giving birth, limiting the number of births, delaying them, or in the case of singles staying away from marriage altogether – a problem that Indians and Malays do not encounter. Hence the 'eugenic' state's dilemma.



Table 15  
Number of graduates by ethnicity (percent)

	1980	1990	2000
Chinese	1.5	4.6	5.9
Malays	0.2	1.0	0.7
Indians	1.4	3.1	2.6
Others	2.2	3.2	2.8

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

The Graduate Mothers Scheme was therefore implemented in January 1984, giving preferential school admission to children whose mothers were university graduates and additional income tax relief, while offering grants of S\$10,000 to less educated, low-earning women below 30 years of age who agreed to be sterilized after the birth of their first or second child.<sup>35</sup> Prof Saw Swee Hock explains, “what it means is that the policy encourages those who are less educated... to undergo sterilization”.<sup>36</sup> In 1984 at the height of the Great Marriage Debate, the state also established a Social Development Unit (SDU) to act as matchmaker for unmarried university graduates, and slogans like “Make a little room for love” became regular catch-phrases. The SDU provided opportunities for single graduates to interact and find their life partner through its socialization and match making programmes.<sup>37</sup> Ridiculed as a dating agency for the “Single, Desperate and Ugly”, the SDU matches graduate Singaporeans – for the most part Chinese – who have little time or simply do not know how to find a romantic partner. The new unit even arranged love boat cruises to take such graduates on romantic trips up the Singapore River, coyly announcing: “We just provide the intro – the rest is up to you”. Other measures included speed dating according to Chinese zodiac dates. Several television and SDU commercials also exhorted young university-educated males and females to get

<sup>35</sup> Reported in *The Straits Times* of 24 January 1984.

<sup>36</sup> Saw Swee Hock, “Changes in the Fertility Policy of Singapore”, 1990.

<sup>37</sup> The Government announced on 17 November 2006 that the SDU was being disbanded, leaving matchmaking activities to more glamorous private dating agencies and professional matchmakers. In announcing the move, the state acknowledged that it had been “unable to shake off its image as a state-controlled dating agency”, as reported in *The Straits Times* of 18 November 2006. Singles, disliking the stigma attached to the SDU, also questioned the need for the government to get involved in something as private as dating.

married and procreate. One such commercial from the SDU featured a young graduate Chinese father proudly cradling his infant daughter. Flushing with pride, he says, “Now for the first time I realized what life was really about – not money, not status, but the future and here in my arms was the future and we were a family”. Another agency, the Social Development Service (SDS) catered to singles with no tertiary education. Many of the policies, especially those affecting placement of children in the highly competitive Singapore schools, proved controversial and were generally unpopular because they were considered by the minority communities as elitist and as favouring the Chinese.

My Indian and Malay respondents almost unanimously point both to the importance of the subtle measures undertaken by the state to boost the Chinese population and the importance accorded to Chinese graduate women, both single and married. To varying degrees they show their displeasure at what they perceive to be the state’s obsession with Chinese graduate women and their inability to produce sufficient babies to match the Indians and Malays. They attribute this concern to insecurity and the fear that in the years to come Chinese dominance would be undermined by their diminishing numbers. “I don’t understand why the Government is so paranoid about this subject!” questions Premavathy a nurse. Agreeing Rambai, a 44-year old mother of three says, “I think it’s most unfair for the Government to have given special treatment to the Chinese. What about their call for multiracialism and equal rights and opportunities for all? This policy is most discriminatory”. Another mother, 58-year old Radha, says she felt cheated as a non-graduate because she did not agree with the state’s socio-biological view that graduate women produced more intelligent children:

I could not go to the university simply because I did not have the means to do so, yet the Government thinks I’m stupid and incapable of producing bright children. But I’ve three very bright children, one a doctor, another software engineer and the third an architect.

Yet again another non-graduate Indian working mother says that her children were disadvantaged by not getting to the school of their choice, as opposed to her graduate neighbour’s children. She was also deprived of the additional tax benefits that only graduate mothers receive from the state. “The biggest blow was that I had to undergo sterilization because the Government felt that as a non-graduate I should not have more children”, says Pratibha.

In 1985 the Graduate Mother's Scheme was abandoned or modified on the grounds that it had not been effective at increasing the fertility of educated women and that the birth pattern was becoming 'racially' lopsided. The state in 1986 therefore decided to reverse its family planning program to reflect its identification of the low birth rate among the Chinese as one of the country's most serious problems. With the overall birth rate still falling, the old family-planning slogan of "Stop at Two" was replaced by "Have Three or More, if You Can Afford It" and new legislation introduced. A new package of incentives for large families entirely reversed the earlier incentives for small families. It included tax rebates for third children, subsidies for day-care, priority in school enrolment for children from large families, priority in assignment of large families to Housing and Development Board apartments, extended sick leave for civil servants to look after sick children and up to four years' unpaid maternity leave for civil servants. Pregnant women were offered increased counselling to discourage "abortions of convenience" or sterilization after the birth of one or two children. All these measures were targeted at the Chinese although officially it was proclaimed as applicable to everybody. Malays were not considered affected as they were perceived by the state as not having a problem with natural growth unlike the Chinese (see Tables 9-12). It should be noted that these incentives were aimed at graduates in the first instance, Chinese graduates in particular, given the varied rates of education levels according to 'race'. Despite these measures, the mid-1986 to mid-1987 total fertility rate reached a historic low of 1.44 children per woman, far short of the replacement level of 2.1 demographers considered as necessary for population stability. The state reacted in October 1987 by urging Singaporeans not to "passively watch ourselves going extinct." The low birth rates reflected late marriages (see Table 14), and the Social Development Unit extended its matchmaking activities to those holding Advanced level (A-level) secondary educational qualifications as well as to university graduates. The government also announced a public relations campaign to promote the joys of marital bliss and parenthood. In March 1989, the government announced a S\$20,000 tax rebate for fourth children born after January 1, 1988 and paid maternity leave for parents expecting their third child. The population policies demonstrated the state's assumption that its citizens were responsive to monetary incentives and to administrative allocation of the government's medical, educational, and housing

benefits. Changing living standards and social expectations have shown them to be otherwise (see Tables 4 and 5, 9-15).

As the birth rate continued to decline the government began to urge all citizens “to go forth and multiply”.<sup>38</sup> A Ministry of Community Development and Sports survey of 1,481 respondents released in September 2002 pointed out the alarming fact that only half of the females (in their 30s) surveyed expressed their desire to get married compared to 87% for men in the same age group. The state then launched a variety of new programmes over a period of years encouraging couples to have more children by offering increased tax, financial, educational, housing and other incentives. Dating guides and manuals as well as online dating websites and an annual “Romancing Singapore” campaign have now become common. The state is not alone in pushing parenthood. A Singapore doctor, Wei Siang Yu, known as Dr. Love, has produced a reality television show for the Asia-Pacific region in which couples compete to be the first to conceive. The Government also introduced a Baby Bonus Scheme (for babies of married couples) in April 2001 with benefits for the second and third child to encourage couples to have more children. The scheme was enhanced in August 2004 and extended to the first and fourth child. The benefits of the scheme are as shown in Table 16 below:

Table 16

Baby bonus scheme benefits

Birth order	Cash gift from Government	Maximum matching Government contribution	Total benefits
First	\$3,000	—	\$3,000
Second	\$3,000	\$6,000	Up to \$9,000
Third	\$6,000	\$12,000	Up to \$18,000
Fourth	\$6,000	\$12,000	Up to \$18,000

<sup>38</sup> From a 2000 National Day Rally Speech (on 20.8.2000) by Singapore’s ex-Prime Minister and now Senior Minister, Goh Chok Tong. He also said, “We must try to arrest the problem... . Family adds warmth and meaning to our lives. Friends are important, but a family is indispensable”.

Maternity leave for the mother has also been extended from 8 to 12 weeks with additional childcare benefits and a lower maid levy.

Despite all these measures, the fertility level has fallen below the rate needed for the natural replacement of the population, making Singapore increasingly dependent on foreign labour and raising the spectre of a 'graying' population and higher social welfare costs. A major reason for the decline in births, at least according to certain sociologists and doctors, is stress arising from the state ideology's over-emphasis on material success, and academic and work achievement. Singaporeans are supposedly so focused on these achievements that they now have less sex than people in other countries and therefore fewer babies, says Victor Goh, an obstetrician and fertility expert at National University Hospital, who conducted a study on sexual habits in 2002. Goh calls this condition "lifestyle impotency." People had "nothing wrong with the mechanics of sex but were just too stressed out in life" to mate, he said. Stress appears to be the byproduct of the government's push to keep the economy growing, notes Chua Beng Huat, a sociology professor at the National University of Singapore. "One of the most radical things you can do in Singapore is to be contented with your life," he said. "That means you won't compete like hell for the next dollar [but] the ability of the government to maintain its competitive edge economically will collapse."<sup>39</sup> This second scenario the state will not accept. People have been conditioned to excel as they have bought into the work ethic almost as a national duty. As Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, who relinquished office in 2004, has said: "Surveys continue to show that our young place financial and career goals ahead of family formation".<sup>40</sup>

As of 2004, Singapore's birth rate has sunk to an all-time low of 1.24 babies per woman, according to the latest census figures from the Singapore Department of Statistics (see Table 9). Raising it has become a national cause as significant as the fight against terrorism. If the birth rate continues to wane, officials warn, the workforce will shrink and productivity will suffer. There will be fewer people to support a growing elderly population and to sustain the military that protects the 460 square-mile island sandwiched between Indonesia and Malaysia. Goh Chok Tong had

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<sup>39</sup> Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>40</sup> Policy statement issued in Parliament after a debate on pressing national issues ended on Friday, 5 April 2002.

this to say: “This decline in our marriage and procreation rates is clearly a national problem,” warning that a baby shortage could threaten Singapore’s economy and survival as a nation in the long term.<sup>41</sup> In other words, if educated women do not reproduce, the *quality* of Singapore’s population would decline.<sup>42</sup> “This is a matter of values, not of incentives,” new Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong says in his 2004 National Day speech. “We want people to have babies because you want them and you love them. It’s part of a happy family life”. But not everybody agrees with what the government leaders claim. Says a respondent Muniamma, a 55-year old hospital attendant, “By offering incentives to women who are university graduates – the government means Chinese – they are just trying to increase the number of ethnic Chinese”. Yet because of work pressures, childcare has become a major issue and related to it is the problem of foreign maids, seen by the middle class as essential items for having both children and continuing to make money. Thus the severe regulations and conditions imposed by the state to discourage such maids whilst acknowledging the need for such labour (see Chapter 4.4).

Another family policy emanating from the declining birth rate among Singaporeans concerns the rights to citizenship: as from 15 May 2004, children born to Singapore women abroad are able to obtain Singapore citizenship by the mother’s descent. Singaporean men residing abroad had already been permitted to pass on their citizenship to their children born overseas. In a statement released by the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA), it was claimed that the law will become gender neutral to reflect the trend of increasing numbers of Singaporean men and women travelling overseas. Suffice to mention that a large number of Singaporean women living abroad include university graduates or the equivalent and are mainly ethnic Chinese, demonstrating once again that all these policies have a racial dimension.

#### **6.4 Population policy**

Population trends in Singapore since the colonial period show that transnational immigration has always been a vital part of Singapore’s demographic history and is directly linked to its economic development. By 1827 the Chinese

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<sup>41</sup> Policy statement issued in Parliament after a debate on pressing national issues ended on Friday, 5 April 2002.

<sup>42</sup> Saw, *Changes in the Fertility Policy of Singapore*.

were already the major community in Singapore reaching 63% by 1881 and by 1914 comprised more than 75% of the total population, a proportion that is carefully maintained and managed by the nation state today.<sup>43</sup> Both the colonial and postcolonial governments have seen it desirable to keep this racial balance intact because of its presumed significance to the economy of Singapore. ‘Unhappiness’ [read, economic failure] would result if significant changes were made to the racial make-up, according to then Deputy Prime Minister and now Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.<sup>44</sup> Importantly the state relies on economic success for the maintenance of racial harmony in the multiracial, multicultural, multilingual and multireligious nation state. Senior PAP leaders have all reiterated the importance of economic progress for the wellbeing of the nation. Saying that ‘race’ was a human instinct that would not go away, Lee Kuan Yew emphasised in his 1989 National Day speech that altering the balance would mean economic problems. Lee said:

Let us just maintain the status quo. And we have to maintain it or there will be a shift in the economy, both the economic performance and the political backdrop that makes that economy possible.

Alluding to the perceived ‘superiority’ of the Chinese people and their ‘race’ – the result of his eugenics philosophy - he said:

You look at the educational levels of the performers. It has got to do with culture, nature and so many other factors. But year after year, this is the end result... The formula has worked. Keep it.

Population control policies since independence have been formulated to “achieve a population of a certain size and quality”, according to Tamney, with selective immigration (besides encouraging a higher birth rate) increasingly becoming, in the words of then National Development Minister S Dhanabalan, an “important tool to solve Singapore’s population problem”.<sup>45</sup> This has been the main thrust of the state’s eugenics programme as spelt out by Prime Minister Lee in a Parliament Select Committee Report passed in 1969. Referring to “...less

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<sup>43</sup> Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

<sup>44</sup> *The Straits Times*, 3 Feb 1991.

<sup>45</sup> Tamney, *The Struggle over Singapore’s Soul*, 75; S Dhanabalan, Minister of National Development, in a speech on 19 August 1989 to celebrate National Day.

economically productive people reproducing themselves at rates higher than the rest,” he reiterated that this situation will “increase the total population of less productive people” whom he called “the irresponsible, the social delinquents”. He therefore recommended that measures be taken to raise the “total quality” of the population by “correcting a trend which can leave our society with a large number of the physically, intellectually and culturally anaemic”.<sup>46</sup> Referring to the quality of the population, he said at a National Day Rally Speech in 1986:

I am often accused of interfering in the private lives of citizens. Yet, if I did not, had I not done that, we wouldn't be here today. And I say without the slightest remorse... we would not have made economic progress if we had not intervened on very personal matters...<sup>47</sup>

To maintain the Chinese ratio and expand their “talent pool”<sup>48</sup>, the state has therefore been silently and covertly accelerating immigration of skilled people from ‘traditional sources’, namely, Hong Kong/China/Taiwan to settle in Singapore on the grounds that it was necessary to keep Singapore’s “racial balance”.<sup>49</sup> In 1989 immigration rules were liberalized to absorb 25,000 Hong Kong skilled workers, the state emphasizing that such a move would not upset the existing racial proportions that would remain intact. However controversy raged over the state’s decision, leading people especially the minority communities to question its motives.<sup>50</sup> Was it a necessity born out of a need to take more immigrants or was it an attempt to maintain and institutionalize Chinese dominance? The reality of the race theme was that many among the minorities saw themselves being disadvantaged by ethnic Chinese immigrants. Lee Kuan Yew himself drew reference to a straw poll taken which showed that a clear majority of Chinese in Singapore agreed to the policy of taking in more of their own kind from Hong Kong, while a clear majority of Malays and Indians were unhappy with it.<sup>51</sup> In the eyes of the minorities, the state’s top-

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<sup>46</sup> Abortion Bill, Third Reading, 29 December 1969, Select Committee Report, 321-3, as reported in Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, 103.

<sup>47</sup> Reported in *The Straits Times*, 20 April 1987.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 15 August 1983.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 29 July 1989.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 21 August 1989.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 31 August 1989.



down decision served to perpetuate the position of the Chinese as the dominant community in Singapore. Conversely, the minorities saw themselves as minorities in perpetuity so long as the state's policy was maintained. Asks Raj Kumar, a 58-year old medical practitioner:

If the Government believes in fair and equal treatment of the races under its policy of multiracialism, why impose quotas on the racial balance? Is it because the Malays are seen to reproduce faster than the other communities? Why import talent only from China? Why not from India?

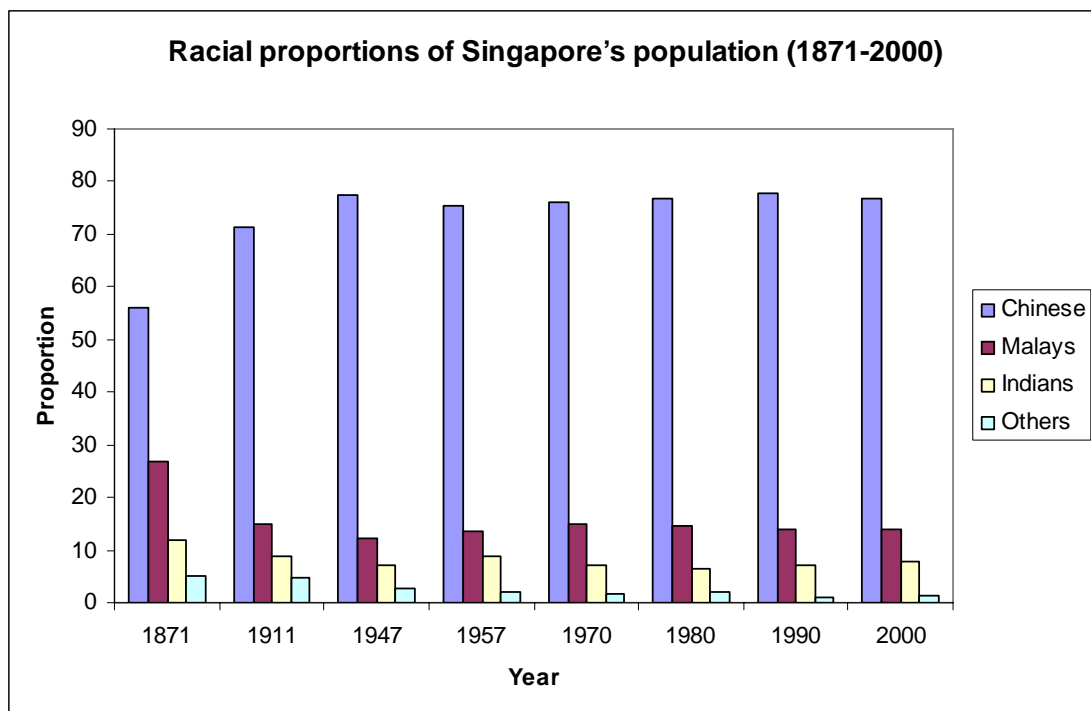
While the minorities saw the quota policy as unfair and unethical, the state countered this concern by arguing that if the Chinese formed the dominant community it is not because of machinations but because of natural migration which saw them as a majority community ever since 1871 (when the first census was taken) and possibly even earlier – see Table 17 below), a status quo that the minorities had accepted as normal all along and hence one there was no reason to tinker with.

Table 17

Racial proportions of Singapore's population (1871-2000) (percent)

Race	1871	1911	1947	1957	1970	1980	1990	2000
Chinese	56.2	71.4	77.6	75.4	76.2	76.9	77.8	76.8
Malays	26.9	15.0	12.3	13.6	15.0	14.6	14.0	13.9
Indians	11.8	9.0	7.3	9.0	7.0	6.4	7.1	7.9
Others	5.1	4.6	2.8	2.0	1.8	2.1	1.1	1.4

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.



Justifying the policy of encouraging Hong Kong skilled workers into Singapore, then National Development Minister, S Dhanabalan felt that the Chinese dominant race was good for Singapore saying that making up “75% of the population they don’t feel threatened”, hence “they would be prepared to make more effort to meet the sensitivities of the minorities... they can accept talented Malays and Indians”. The Indian minority had feared that a major inflow of qualified, skilled immigrants from Hong Kong would reduce their numbers in Singapore. Notwithstanding the Government’s assurance that their position in Singapore would not be eroded and that the existing racial composition would remain intact, many among them still feel insecure, their insecurity being compounded by the emigration of a disproportionately high number of well-educated Indians from Singapore. Says an Indian employee in a private company, 45-year old Kumaran, “The Government only thinks of improving the Chinese race at the expense of minorities like us. Even our Indian PAP MPs and Ministers agree with this policy – they are just ‘yes’ men”. Such a response is echoed by many other Indian respondents. Being aware of the situation and to allay the fears of the Indian minority the Government therefore moved to attract talented overseas Indians to *replace* those who had emigrated and to strengthen the community. In this way the state has reiterated its desire to maintain the racial balance. One reason adduced by the state for Indian Singaporeans

emigrating was their mobility and strength in English, a factor generated by the success of the state's bilingual policy and emphasis on English – social engineering policies that had been the pillar of its multiracial policy. Notwithstanding the state's stand on racial balance, many Indians still feel threatened by the state's emphasis on Chineseness and on the Chinese population as the cornerstone for economic progress and social stability. Twenty-eight year old construction foreman Murugaiyah laments, "Our jobs are being taken away by these Chinese immigrants, simply because they are Chinese, even though they don't speak good English". Distribution of the population is certainly seen as an issue of 'race' in Singapore, though the government is aware that such sensitivities should not upset racial or religious sentiments and emotions.

Further, numerous undergraduate and postgraduate scholarships are offered to candidates from China in stark contrast to placements of students from India and other neighbouring countries. In addition, companies recruiting technical and professional employees from China have their work and employment permits fast-tracked. Permanent Resident permits are also readily dangled in front of them and they come with most of the rights and duties accorded to citizens, with a further advantage over Singapore citizens in the fact that they are exempted from military service. The official justification is that as Singapore is mainly culturally Chinese it is easier for Chinese nationals to adjust to local society and therefore become more productive. Another justification is that China is looked upon as the next economic superpower, and building relationships and networks with Chinese students and business entrepreneurs would create benefits to Singapore in the long run. More telling is Lee Kuan Yew's scientific reasoning in terms of "innate ethnic qualities" when comparing East Asians to Malays.<sup>52</sup> In addition, he considers that,

Climate and diet may have given East Asians a cultural edge over Southeast Asians in coping with modern economic development. They may account in part for the intense, thrifty, and largely secular societies of China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam.<sup>53</sup>

In line with this approach to population policies, the state is seen by my respondents to recruit short-term, low-skilled and darker-complexioned labourers

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<sup>52</sup> *The Mirror*, 21 October 1968.

<sup>53</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, Lecture at Columbia University, New York, reported in *Eastern Sun*, 23 December 1968.

from countries like India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Philippines on a ‘use-and-discard’ policy with several restrictive conditions attached (see Chapter 4.4).<sup>54</sup> Says Kurup, a 56-year old manager of an employment agency recruiting foreign workers into Singapore, “The Government mostly imports low-skilled labour from these countries. Why such a wide disparity – why not predominantly from China where labour is equally cheap?” The ‘easier-to-adjust’ response given by the state should apply just as much, the argument goes. Some of my respondents also perceive that the state prefers to recruit brown and darker-complexioned workers because they are easily identifiable from the local majority Chinese and therefore greater surveillance can be exercised on their conduct in Singapore. “They can be easily spotted and punished if they overstay” says Arokiasamy, a 43-year old labour consultant working for a private firm. Similar arguments are put forward by other respondents, including Thayalan, a 39-year old stevedoring clerk in a shipping company, who sums it all up in the following words, “I think the government is discriminating between the races”, a view not disputed by many of my participants.

With ‘racial’ and ‘ethnic’ identity being an underlying factor in immigration policy dividing foreign workers coming to Singapore, the question of national identity and nation building based on the CMIO model of multiracialism and multiculturalism becomes more problematic because of the complexities of social interaction derived from ethnic categories prevailing in Singapore society. The Chinese ‘race’, presented as ‘racially’ and culturally superior, is seen to be exclusionary of minority communities in Singapore and therefore as not appreciating the linguistic and cultural worlds of other ‘races’ or ethnicities. With the politics of sameness and difference becoming more complex within each ‘race’, the task of forging a national identity based on the CMIO model of separate-but-equal ‘races’ becomes even more difficult. This difficulty is seen to multiply manifold when the plight of the Malays and Indians in Singapore is examined. Government leaders building upon common stereotypical perceptions complicate the rhetoric of national identity by asserting that the Chinese

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<sup>54</sup> Brenda S A Yeoh, S Huang and J Gonzales, “Migrant Female Domestic Workers: Debating the Economic, Social and Political Impact in Singapore,” *International Migration Review* 33, 1 (1999): 114-136.

have a business culture whereas the Malays and Indians, if they are to compete in the national economy, need to acquire one.<sup>55</sup>

## 6.5 ‘Chineseness’ of Singapore

With ethnic Chinese comprising about 77% of the population, one may be forgiven for categorizing the city-state as a Chinese nation – indeed prominent neo-Confucian scholar Wei-ming Tu calls the island city “a sanitized version of Chinese society” and emphasizes its Chineseness.<sup>56</sup> There is no single definition of the term ‘Chineseness’. However, it is normally referred to as the identity displayed by overseas Chinese who articulate identifiable cultural standards and the socio-cultural traits of being a Chinese, largely as a result of the re-emergence of China and the resurgence of Chinese pride worldwide. In Singapore, as in China, ‘Chineseness’ is primarily defined as a matter of blood and descent combined with a sense of cultural pride emanating from the Chinese ‘yellow race’, which is often described as endowed with superior attributes in comparison to the ‘black race’ and the ‘brown race’. As Dr Sun Yat-sen, the leading proponent of a Chinese nation-race said in his famous *Three Principles of the People*:

The greatest force is common blood. The Chinese belong to the yellow race because they come from the blood stock of the yellow race. The blood of ancestors is transmitted by heredity down through the race, making blood kinship a powerful force.<sup>57</sup>

A textbook used in primary schools in China in the beginning of the 1920s explained to its readers that:

Mankind is divided into five races. The yellow and white races are relatively strong and intelligent. Because the other races are feeble and stupid, they are being exterminated by the white race. Only the yellow race competes with the white race. This is so-called evolution... . Among the contemporary races

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<sup>55</sup> Helen Kopnina, “Cultural Hybrids or Ethnic Fundamentalists? Discourses on Ethnicity in Singaporean SMEs,” *Asian Ethnicity*, 5, 2 (June 2004): 249.

<sup>56</sup> Tu Wei Ming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).

<sup>57</sup> Sun Yat Sen, *Sanminzhuyi (Three Principles of the People)*, (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1927), 4-5.

that could be called superior, there are only the yellow and the white races. China is [belongs to] the yellow race.<sup>58</sup>

While there has been no clear definition of the term ‘Chineseness’ in the Singapore context, it is generally used to refer to the condition of being ethnic Chinese in relation to other ethnic communities, namely Malay, Indian and Others. With the diverse backgrounds of the Chinese in Singapore, ‘Chineseness’ is actually a contested and heterogeneous notion. However, since independence, the ruling political party, the People’s Action Party (PAP), has established itself as the dominant authority on ethnicity and Chineseness, contributing to how Singaporeans perceive Chineseness and what being Chinese means. Consequently, the state has identified Mandarin as the symbolic mother tongue of the Chinese thus emphasizing Chinese ethnic culture and its linkage with language, in the same way as each of the other ethnic groups in the CMIO classification are given their own official language. The racialised categories are further entrenched in Singapore society through cultural policies that hegemonically allow the state to specify cultural boundaries and intervene to ensure that these boundaries are maintained. In the process the state then not only claims political legitimacy through the management of ethnic relations but also institutes itself as the sole authority on ethnic identities and cultures.

Consequently the racial concept of ‘Chineseness’ is seen by Singaporeans as a crucial factor in shaping the social engineering policies of the PAP Government. Some of these policies, particularly those introduced post-1980s, are perceived to intensify the ‘Chineseness’ of the nation – what is normally referred to as ‘sinicisation’. Cultural policies cited consistently by academics and scholars include the state-sponsored annual Speak Mandarin campaign, the official promotion of Confucian ethics (later dropped from the school syllabus because it appeared to encourage excessive religious zealotry among Christians and Muslims), the attempt to institutionalize an ‘Asian Values’ policy based on Confucian ideals, the state’s eagerness to cultivate a bilingual and bicultural Chinese elite through the introduction of Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools, eagerness to encourage immigrants from China and the worry that the Chinese were not reproducing themselves. All of these are perceived by my informants to be ethnocentric and geared towards ensuring Chinese dominance arising from the socially engineered

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<sup>58</sup> L Wiegner, *Moralisme Officiel des Ecoles*, en 1920, Hien-hien, 1921, 180 (original Chinese text).

‘racialisation’ of identities. It is widely viewed by scholars that such cultural policies of ‘sinicisation’ or increased Chineseness pose a threat to ethnic harmony in Singapore and thus compromise the ideal of multiracialism by pandering to the interests of the ethnic Chinese, in so doing marginalizing other ethnic groups. Yet critics also point out that the state had been careful to deemphasize Chineseness in the early post-independence period because of its feared impact on racial harmony and the necessity to promote the use of English as a neutral language. Clammer, for instance, characterizes the development of Singapore from the 1980s as a “slow shift from genuine pluralism or multiracialism – the original ‘founding charter’ of post-colonial Singapore society - towards distinctive Sinocentrism in language policy, political culture, promotion of high culture and citing of Singapore within the geo-politics of the wider region”.<sup>59</sup> This view is echoed by Lily Zubaidah Rahim who, in writing about the Malays in Singapore, posits that official policies encourage political and cultural dominance of the Chinese. She says:

The political marginality of the Malays has allowed the PAP leadership to strengthen its political base within the Chinese community and to promote the nation as a Chinese-dominated Confucian society. The long-term political, social and geo-political ramifications of a Sinicised Singapore in a Malay region are alarming...”.<sup>60</sup>

Vasil views the attempts to preserve Singapore’s ‘Asianness’ by reference to Confucian values as “insidious attempts at Sinicising Singapore”, though it is generally accepted by my respondents that Confucian values in a pragmatic sense do benefit others besides the Chinese.<sup>61</sup> Another scholar Eugene Tan describes Singapore’s state policies as a “creeping Chineseness”.<sup>62</sup>

The concerns of the academics, scholars and historians are shared by the minorities who perceive that they have been marginalized by Chinese dominance in

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<sup>59</sup> Geoffrey Benjamin, “The Cultural Logic of Singapore’s ‘Multiracialism’” in *Singapore: Society in Transition*, ed. Riaz Hassan (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), 177.

<sup>60</sup> Lily Zubaidah Rahim Ishak, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>61</sup> Raj Vasil, *Asianising Singapore: The PAP’s Management of Ethnicity* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1995), 122.

<sup>62</sup> Eugene K B Tan, “Re-engaging Chineseness: Political, Economic and Cultural Imperatives of Nation-building in Singapore,” *The China Quarterly* 175 (2003).

Singapore, leading to a fear that Singapore would increasingly become a Chinese state. Chandran, a 51-year old engineer, contends that although the state constantly asserts the need for national identity and celebrates diversity, it has done little to accommodate and balance differences between the Chinese cultural attributes and those of the other ethnic groups. Rather he feels that policy statements and frequent pronouncements by the state only serve to accentuate cultural differences and create suspicion. In his words, “We should deemphasize our cultural differences, instead of giving too much importance to the Chinese culture and language and less importance to our Indian and other minority groups in Singapore”. His views are echoed by any number of my Indian respondents, all of whom believe that the Government was “playing with fire” by giving undue importance to one ‘racial’ group at the expense of the other. They are consistent in their anxiety over a perceived ethnocentrism in state policies that could disturb racial harmony and result in other ethnic groups asserting their rights. However, the political leadership has consistently gone on record to allay their fears reiterating the contention that such fears are misguided and that the races should accept and appreciate each others’ ethnic values. A speech by Wong Kan Seng, then Foreign Minister, at a National Day celebration on 14 August 1998, is an example of the state’s view that the concerns of minority communities are unfounded.<sup>63</sup>

Chineseness – whether in language, culture, national or political affiliations or a combination of these elements – has, since independence, greatly impacted upon the state’s attitude towards race relations and national identity. In various ways, the state has over the years negotiated with, suppressed or celebrated aspects of Chineseness as it sought to forge a nation and construct a cohesive Singaporean identity out of a colonial society of immigrant descendants. As Gramsci has shown, in the Singapore context the ideology of nationalism has become a hegemonic imposition by the dominant Chinese class on the minority communities.

One of the critical factors that have strongly contributed to the Chineseness of Singapore has been the fact that the Chinese have comprised the dominant community since the first government census of 1871. Their demographic dominance continues to this day, a result of deliberate state-managed planning of ethnicity. The numerical

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<sup>63</sup> Reported in *The Straits Times* of 15 August 1998.



majority of the Chinese along with their dominance in trade, entrepreneurship and capital has thus given Singapore the unique character of an essentially Chinese city ever since colonial times. A natural consequence was the attitude - particularly from the Chinese-educated masses – that Singapore belonged to them alone and therefore they could assert “themselves as the dominant majority”.<sup>64</sup> The Malays with their emotions still aligned to the Malaysian political leadership during the merger period of 1963 to 1965 were suspected of harbouring anti-Chinese feelings. Somewhat logically, according to Vasil, they feared that with independence Chinese chauvinism in Singapore would “be extremely difficult to curb and control” and “was likely to assert itself with greater vehemence”.<sup>65</sup> This was the situation that led to widespread communal rioting when Singapore became a self-governing state in the newly formed Federation of Malaysia during the years 1963-1965.<sup>66</sup> It was the mistrust and fear caused by the anti-Chinese attitudes of the Malaysian leaders towards their Singapore counterparts that led to considerable friction between a Malay-dominated Malaysian leadership and a Chinese-dominated Singapore leadership, leading to Singapore being dismissed from the Malaysian Federation and achieving full independence in 1965. Racial politics and ‘race’ relations have indelibly marked the political and social landscape of Singapore ever since.

Realizing regional sensitivities of “ethnicity” and ‘race’, the first leaders of the new nation state decided to deemphasize the Chineseness of Singapore in an effort to appease Malays and maintain harmony between the various ‘races’. English, along with Chinese (Mandarin), Malay and Tamil became official languages with English the language of administration and education while the Chinese (Mandarin), Malay and Tamil languages became second mother tongue languages in schools. Sociologist Nirmala Purushotam argues that while the state promotes English as the official language of nation building, it also specifically identifies Mandarin as “the symbolic mother tongue of the Chinese in Singapore, thereby emphasizing Chinese ethnic

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<sup>64</sup> I have explained in previous chapters that the British colonial administration had, by their segregation policy, set up vernacular language schools for the different ethnic communities, English language education then being available only to a limited number of people. Hence there was a proliferation of separate Chinese, Malay and Tamil schools. Most Chinese therefore were fluent in their vernacular language and its cultural values; Raj Vasil, *Asianising Singapore*, 4.

<sup>65</sup> Vasil, *Asianising Singapore*, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Vasil says that ruling PAP leaders eagerly sought the merger with Malaysia, firstly for the economic benefits of a big Malaysian hinterland and secondly to contain radical chauvinist and communist elements within the party who could potentially spell disaster for the island.

culture and unity”.<sup>67</sup> By keeping Mandarin relevant, the state appeases the Chinese who feel a loss of culture because of the importance placed on English-medium education. It also reduces internal differences engendered by various Chinese regional dialects by promoting Mandarin as the lingua franca of the Chinese. Finally it contains Chineseness by subordinating it to the national and global imperatives of English.

In trying to deemphasize Chineseness in the early stages of independence, the PAP leaders antagonized the Chinese-educated masses who felt undermined by state policies creating an essentially English-speaking Singapore, but, in the late 1970s, there was a resurgence of Chineseness among a new generation of local born bilingual Chinese who began to rediscover their cultural values that, in their opinion, had not been given sufficient importance since independence. They realized that in a now socially stable and economically strong independent Singapore, it was an opportune time to give greater relevance to an ‘Asian Values’ discourse based on Chinese cultural values. Some of the state’s social engineering policies proved unpopular among the minority communities, notably the Malays and to a lesser extent Indians, who felt that the state was reneging on its founding principle of multiracial democracy and eroding its commitment of deemphasizing the Chineseness of Singapore. Sixty-seven-year old retired shipping company clerk Vamadevan is unhappy with the overemphasis given to the Chinese. He says, “The Government talks about multiracialism and equality of the races but does not practise it. Just because we are in the minority we are given less importance. We are second-class citizens”. Agreeing, a 54-year old female social worker Indrani says, “This is a Chinese country. I think we Indians have no place here. They [the Chinese] control everything”. Almost the same response comes from Nonis, a 55-year old male Eurasian club manager: “This is their country.... They think they can impose their authority at will. The trouble is we have no say because they are in the majority”. I also sought the view of a Malay citizen, Harun a 69-year old retired government clerk who has this to say about the Chinese, “They forget that this country belongs to all of us Chinese, Indians, Malays and all. The races have lived in relative harmony all these years, but now the Government appears to be rocking the boat”. However, with

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<sup>67</sup> Nirmala Purushotam, *Negotiating Language, Constructing Race: Disciplining Difference in Singapore* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998).

increasing economic prosperity in Singapore, the state has, under a new leadership within the ruling PAP Government, reassured the Malays and other ethnic groups of its adherence to multiracialism/multiculturalism by reducing economic disparities between the ethnic groups and opening new avenues for the various 'ethnicities' to enable them to better appreciate their own ethnic values.<sup>68</sup> Many Indians however remain unconvinced that the state is doing enough for the minority communities. Their concerns are summed up in this response from a lawyer in private practice, 59-year old Mohan Arunasalam:

The Chinese by virtue of their numbers and political clout have greater access to state resources. At the same time the Government places too much focus on Chinese cultural values as benefiting the nation and pays only lip service to the position of the Indians and Malays.

Restored Chineseness has reached new heights by the state confronting the fear of deculturation among the Chinese thus giving more emphasis to their language, culture and identity. Government leaders feel that such measures were necessary to improve the overall quality of the population, maintain political stability, enhance economic prosperity and global competitiveness, strengthen family values and prevent skilled and educated Singaporeans moving out of Singapore. Explaining the state's changing stance with the Chinese in an interview with Raj Vasil in May 1991, Goh Chok Tong explains:

In the last few years... the government has intervened actively – in the case of the Chinese, to get the Chinese to speak Mandarin, to celebrate their cultural month, and for government leaders to be seen as patrons for certain Chinese organizations.<sup>69</sup>

But the Prime Minister did not agree with Dr Vasil who suggested that Chinese Singaporeans were asserting themselves, saying that they were, in fact, more aware of the need to accommodate differences between themselves and other 'races'. He clarifies this by saying, "Of course, when we do that for the Chinese, because of our commitment to multiculturalism we would do likewise for the Malays and the Indians". Apart from the aggressive public promotion of Mandarin pursuant to the

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<sup>68</sup> Under an exercise of leadership renewal, Goh Chok Tong took over as Prime Minister from Lee Kuan Yew in 1990 and began a process of reconciliation with the Malays while at the same time enhancing the Chineseness of the Chinese. This policy has been continued by the present Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

<sup>69</sup> Reported by Dr Vasil in his work *Asianising Singapore*, 113.

‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign, several programmes have been hegemonically introduced in the last two decades. These include the extolling of Confucianist values, population and family policies, large-scale revival of hitherto banned economic, academic and tourist ties with China, vigorous encouragement of immigration from China, and the glorification of Chinese culture manifested in such forms as the Special Assistance Plan schools for gifted Chinese students, building of elaborate theme parks, and large budgets for Chinese TV serials.<sup>70</sup> While open opposition to these measures has been muted, private criticism between individuals is prevalent. Argues 54-year old teacher Ambika:

Even my colleagues in school speak very often of rediscovering their roots. They have an emotional attachment to China to such an extent that they look forward to making visits to China during the school holidays. Such a longing for China and things Chinese was not there 20 or 30 years ago and I attribute this change to the Government’s huge efforts to project Chinese cultural values. I have also observed that even though non-Chinese like myself are present in the company, they continue to speak Mandarin among themselves.

Her observations bear similarity to what Lal Singh, a 47-year old importer of electronics with close Chinese connections, says, “Whenever my Chinese business associates travel to China for business or work purposes, they look upon their trip with nostalgic longing because of love for their ethnic culture and values”. Greater discontent is displayed by Indian housewife Susila who complains that Channel 8 of Singapore Television caters specifically to a Chinese audience with an exclusively Chinese perspective. Yet another respondent, 21 year-old Balendran undergoing National Service thinks that the minority communities are being marginalized in many ways. He cites the example of Singapore Airlines portraying only the Chinese ethnic group in their advertisements, though he fails to mention that the attire of the stewardesses strongly reflects Malay designs and fabric.

While Chineseness permeates every aspect of Chinese society in Singapore, it also affects relations with the minority communities. Apart from long-standing historically induced negative stereotypes between the ethnic groups, its interethnic

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<sup>70</sup> Hussin Mutalib, “Consider Things that may Hinder Multiracialism,” *The Straits Times*, 30 June 1990, 32; Bertha Henson and Sumiko Tan, “Quest for a S’pore Identity,” *The Straits Times*, 15 June 1990, 25.

relevances are also seen in social and cultural occurrences in spaces common to the various ethnicities in Singapore. A Chinese roadside opera (called *wayang*) or funeral wake in the void deck of the HDB block or pavement prayers as in the burning of joss sticks and paper money on the grass verge of the HDB apartment block, for example, all convey different meanings for interethnic perceptions and attitudes. How residents regard and negotiate these public Chinese functions reveals the complex means by which they resolve and accommodate cultural-religious differences. I took the opportunity of speaking to both Indian and Malay residents in an HDB block at the bottom of which Chinese residents (also living in the block) were burning paper money and incense sticks to celebrate the Seventh Moon Festival (also called Hungry Ghosts Festival).<sup>71</sup> While most of my respondents are careful to report that they had no choice but to tolerate and accept the noise, ash and public movement on the grounds as it was an important cultural event for the Chinese, some are not so charitable in their perceptions. Says Mariamma, an Indian housewife:

They make too much noise and we cannot sleep especially my little granddaughter who is not well. The ash also flies into my flat and I don't like it – it may be polluting and dangerous. Stepping on burnt joss paper is a bad omen you know. You may get sick after that. Why are the Chinese allowed to do this in public whereas Indians like us have to remain quiet and accept whatever is going on? They [the Chinese] just want to dominate because they think everything belongs to them. If we Indians were to conduct our ceremonies like them, will they keep quiet?

Another Indian resident, Soosai a 47-year old teacher was quick to agree. Salmah, a 40-year old Malay nurse says:

HDB practices discrimination in the treatment of festivals between the various races. When the Chinese burn their joss sticks and paper money, they litter the turf and burn it as well. But they get away with it, but when the Malays accidentally burn the turf when they do their cooking in the void deck during a marriage ceremony, they are fined and their deposit forfeited.

Chineseness, which takes as its central mission the promotion of Chinese culture and language among the Chinese 'race' will, in the eyes of the minorities, exclude these communities from acceptance into mainstream culture and the Chinese

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<sup>71</sup> The Seventh Moon Festival or Hungry Ghosts Festival is held to appease ancestors, gods and ghosts believed to be released from hell in the seventh lunar month of the Chinese calendar.

cultural world – a racist trend which, if not checked, could lead to harmful consequences for harmony between the various ethnic groups. On the other hand, Chinese cultural values linked to the dominant ideology have been primarily responsible for Singapore's economic success, political stability and peace, say both Lee Kuan Yew and his successor Goh Chok Tong in public speeches.<sup>72</sup> State ideologies underlying the insistence on cultural and moral values are all based on supposed Chinese values, like thrift, hard work and obedience, say my respondents. This cultural bias on the part of the state has oriented most of the social engineering policies that have been implemented to date. Especially since the 1980s, the state has sponsored and supported many programmes, as set out above, to enhance Chinese culture and fine-tune it to suit the themes of the dominant ideology.

## 6.6 Asian Shared Values

These attributes of Chinese culture based mainly on Confucian values have since 1996 been formalised to create a set of core Shared Values (hitherto loosely called Asian Values) that have been framed as the national ideology. In an address to mark the opening of the Seventh Parliament on 9 January 1989, then President Wee Kim Wee set out the problem as identified by the state, defining the national ideology on the issue thus:

If we are not to lose our bearings, we should preserve the cultural heritage of each of our communities, and uphold certain common values which capture the essence of being a Singaporean. These core values include placing society above self, resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention, and stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony. We need to enshrine these fundamental ideas in a National Ideology. Such a formal statement will bond us together as Singaporeans, with our own distinct identity and destiny. We need to inculcate this National Ideology in all Singaporeans, especially the young.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Barbara Crossette, "Influences from West Worry Singapore Chief", *New York Times*, 4 January, 1987; Sunny Goh and Tan Ban Huat, "PM Goh on Values that Must Not Clash", *The Straits Times*, 20 December, 1990, 1.

<sup>73</sup> *Shared Values* (Government of Singapore, White Paper, 6 January, 1991), 1-2. Lee Kuan Yew's idea of 'cultural nationalism' originated from his conviction that the implementation of a Western-styled democracy was inapplicable to Asian societies because of cultural differences. Explaining the reasons for Lee's stance, Brown says, "The state elites consider cultural nationalism to offer a stronger

So as to ensure acceptance by all, the state took pains to assure the population, especially the minority groups, that these Shared Values were not overly promoting Confucian ideas or ideas based on a perceived Chinese superior race or culture. This was in response to appeals by minority leaders like Othman Haron Eusofe, a Malay MP, that the sensitivities of minority communities should be considered when formulating a national ideology so that they do not feel that they are being ‘forced’ into accepting the majority community’s values.<sup>74</sup> A White Paper on Shared Values published on 6 January 1991 explains:

We need to respect the great religions and cultures to which different groups of Singaporeans belong. Each religion or culture encompasses many enduring values, but unfortunately we cannot use any single one of them as the basis for building a common Singaporean identity, without alienating the other groups.<sup>75</sup>

Suggesting that the groups should identify ‘a few key values ... common to ... the groups ... and which draw on the essence of these heritages’, the Shared Values were finally formalised by Parliament and published in the following form:

- Nation before community and society above self
- Family as the basic unit of society
- Community support and respect for the individual
- Consensus not conflict
- Racial and religious harmony

## 6.7 Conclusion

It can be surmised from the eugenics policies and programmes of the state that commitment to Chinese values and culture as the foundation for economic growth and stability was and is the dominant ideology, at least from the late 1970s onwards. They were sidelined temporarily after independence in 1965 to guard against geopolitical tensions and sensitivities from the surrounding Muslim world and to

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base for political cohesion and societal loyalty than does political nationalism” (David Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism: Civic, Ethnocultural and Multicultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000) 308. Prior to the 1988 General Elections the PAP Government had developed a series of unpopular policies and the ideology of ‘Asian Values’ and later ‘Shared Values’ is regarded by some of my respondents as a mechanism to counter negative reaction and gather support.

<sup>74</sup> Reported in *The Straits Times*.

<sup>75</sup> *Shared Values* (Government of Singapore, White Paper, 6 January, 1991), 3.

ensure that 'racial' harmony, economic development and political stability were not hampered. Indeed the very survival of the fledgling nation state rested firmly on these objectives and to realize them the hegemonic and paternalistic state used the construct of 'race' ideology to create various forms of social engineering. A 'multiracial' society in which 'ethnicity' became not only the basis for public policy but also an everyday reality in the lives of Singaporeans took shape. Subsequently a resurgence of Chinese ethnicity resulted in new policies designed to further the cause of Chinese culture and identity. This came at a time when the state realized the need for ethnic communities to celebrate their cultures in a multiracial democracy. Population and family policies, immigration and advancement of Chinese cultural values explored in this chapter also demonstrate that they saw their genesis in theories of biological determinism and scientific racism which had inspired the first-generation PAP leaders of the nation state, in particular its former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

One of the key questions that I have been exploring in this chapter is how such policies have impacted on the Indians in Singapore as they go about their daily existence. My findings reveal an important fact that underpins their ethnic negotiation with national identity in Singapore. Suffice to say, these policies reveal that Singapore Indians see themselves as sidelined from the national project by their perception that undue importance is given to Chinese racial, cultural, economic and political dominance at the expense of minority interests. Consequently ethnic Indians search for answers to the vexing question of how to align themselves with national identity. While the social policies discussed in this chapter reveal the direct impact of socio-biology theories, there are also several other policies and programmes instituted by the state that are equally race-based and affect all Singaporeans in their daily lives. Such policies which include housing, language and education, self-help, heritage conservation and compulsory National Service will be explored in the remaining chapters.<sup>76</sup> Throughout this and the subsequent chapters the responses from my Indian interviewees and respondents reveal that there appears to be an inconsistency between the state's ideological espousal of 'multiracial' harmony and the emphasis on 'racial' differences in its policies. Do these seeming opposites clash or reconcile?

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<sup>76</sup> National Service policy issues concern mainly the Malays and not the Indians who are the focus of this thesis.



## CHAPTER 7

### RACIAL POLITICS AND SOCIAL ENGINEERING – HOUSING AND LANGUAGE/EDUCATION POLICIES

Every Singaporean citizen must learn how to be a good citizen; how to be fit; how to be honest, effective, and deserving of belonging to a community with the highest social and living standards in Southeast Asia... the rugged product of a systematic programme for the inculcation of self-discipline.

- Lee Kuan Yew<sup>1</sup>

#### 7.1 Introduction

I have shown in the last two chapters how a racialized political doctrine has continued to function as a mechanism of social control in the new nation state of Singapore after it obtained independence from the British in 1965.<sup>2</sup> Pursuing hegemonic control, the Government implemented various policies of social engineering based on the ideology of ‘race’ to ‘put people in their proper places’. I have also advanced the argument that theories of biological determinism and scientific racism were directly responsible for the imposition of specific immigration, population and family policies as well as the enhancement of Chinese values as the basis of economic growth and social stability. These instruments of social control designed to create the ideal citizen envisioned by Lee Kuan Yew were supplemented by more ‘race’-based initiatives that included housing, language and education, self-help, heritage conservation and National Service.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter I will explore housing and language/education policies to interrogate their relationship with constructions of ‘race’ and ethnicity, and to analyse how such policies dictate the lives of Indians as they grapple with the state’s desire for national identity. Both these

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<sup>1</sup> Speech by Lee Kuan Yew, former Prime Minister and now Minister Mentor, at the National Day Rally, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Full independence was attained after separation from the Malaysian Federation in 1965.

<sup>3</sup> While state policy relating to National Service professes to contribute to social cohesiveness and national integration, there are aspects of this policy that articulate a strong ‘racial’ dimension perceived to relate almost exclusively to the Malay ethnic community. As the ‘racial’ aspect of this policy does not generally affect the Indian community, I have refrained from examining this policy in my thesis.

policies have been fundamental to the state's promotion of 'racial' integration and nation building, impacting on Indians as much as the other ethnic groups. However as this thesis is substantially focused on Singapore Indians, it is their perceptions and worldviews that will take centre-stage.

## 7.2 'Race' and Public Housing

The state has used public housing as a major instrument in bringing about racial integration.

- Minister for National Development S Dhanabalan<sup>4</sup>

Public housing is one of the most critical and pivotal components of the social, cultural and economic changes undertaken by the state since independence to transform the diverse ethnic groups into a harmonious society. With more than 90% of the population now living in public housing estates, public housing is treated as one of the most important aspects of social and economic development and political stability in Singapore. There appears to be a paradox here because it can be argued that in countries with marginalized populations, public housing is not considered as contributing to economic development, whereas in the Singapore context it is an integral part of it. Implemented through the Housing and Development Board (HDB), the state regards the policy as a striking symbol of physical nation building through multiracialism and ethnic interaction. Hence several scholars have argued that public housing is a powerful social engineering tool instilling economic discipline and order in Singapore.<sup>5</sup>

The public housing programme initiated by the nation state is also part of the larger process of urban renewal designed to break up social patterns of living inherited from British rule. During the colonial period, Singapore's population had mostly lived in separate ethnic groupings with little interaction between them. These communities maintained rigid social and physical boundaries compounded by stereotyping and an underlying sense of insecurity. Town planning in colonial Singapore had, as I have explained in Part I, been highly influenced by the Raffles

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<sup>4</sup> Speech by former Minister for National Development S Dhanabalan at a New Year gathering on 6 January 1989, as reported in *The Straits Times* of 7 January 1989.

<sup>5</sup> M Castells, L Goh and R Y-W Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome: Economic Development and Public Housing in Hong Kong and Singapore* (London: Pion, 1990), 244-246; Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore* (London and New York: St Martin's Press, 1994).

Town Plan of 1822 that specified the physical separation of ‘races’ by “appropriating and marking out the quarters or departments of several classes of the native population”.<sup>6</sup> This residential concentration was “reinforced by the desire of the newly landed immigrant to live in association with others of his own land”.<sup>7</sup> While this rigid segregation of ethnic groups no longer exists in its colonial form, its legacy still abounds in the contemporary built landscape dominated by high-rise public housing. Instead of physical separation of ethnic groups, what has taken its place is the deliberate state policy to enforce dispersal and diffusion of ethnic minorities *within* these groups and amongst the Chinese majority based on ‘racial’ categorizations and a state-orchestrated version of identity so as to create the “ideal citizen” of Singapore.

### 7.2.1 Ethnic dispersal (1965-1989)

At the time of independence the various ethnic groups were concentrated in ethnically exclusive communities in the central areas of the town, mainly housed in two or three-storeyed shophouses in varying degrees of dilapidation and living in overcrowded, unsanitary and unhygienic conditions. The authorities considered these dwellings to be “slums” that were “fast hampering the orderly growth of the city”.<sup>8</sup> Alan Choe, then head of the Urban Renewal Department, wrote that “in a land-scarce Singapore it is ironical that there should be a large piece of strategic and valuable land right in the centre of the city occupied by slums and constituting a hindrance to progress and growth”.<sup>9</sup> The other reason for urban renewal was the socio-political necessity to redistribute the population into ‘racially’ mixed public housing estates in satellite towns in the outlying areas that were then characterized by *kampungs* or rural villages. In the 1950s the central areas of the town had been the sites of racial riots between the Malays and the Chinese and of organized violent strikes by left-wing trade unions and student organizations. The resettlement and redistribution of the

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<sup>6</sup> Raffles quoted in C B Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore 1819-1867* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1902/1984), 81.

<sup>7</sup> H E Wilson, *Social Engineering in Singapore: Educational Policies and Social Change 1819-1972* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1978), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Alan F C Choe, “Urban Renewal” in *Modern Singapore*, eds. J B Ooi and H D Chiang (Singapore: University of Singapore, 1969), 163.

<sup>9</sup> Choe, “Urban Renewal” in *Modern Singapore*, 164.

population into the new satellite towns would disrupt the social base of the left-wing political organizations and redistribute the ethnically formed communities into the multi-racial housing estates.<sup>10</sup> Such a move would also thwart any attempt by aggrieved minority members at any one location from posing a political challenge to the PAP-controlled government.

In order to remedy the situation of acute housing shortages which had led to a 'crisis of habitability',<sup>11</sup> the new state established the HDB in 1960 for the task of rapidly building low-cost high-rise flats, initially for Singapore's low-income population.<sup>12</sup> According to the HDB, the home-ownership scheme was "to encourage a property-owning democracy in Singapore, and to enable Singapore citizens in the lower middle income group to own their own homes".<sup>13</sup> As a result of the HDB's massive public housing programme, ethnic concentrations of people in Malay *kampungs* and Chinese villages were dispersed and residents resettled in multi-ethnic housing estates consisting of high-rise apartment blocks. Residents of different ethnic backgrounds and classes had now to live together in the same area for the first time. The state's forced resettlement programme involved "the demolition of established [ethnic] settlements to make land available for the new housing estates".<sup>14</sup> This was achieved through mandatory land acquisition obtained through compensation based on values drastically below market rates. The Land Acquisition Act of 1966, a 'gift' of colonial rule, empowered the state to acquire any land deemed necessary for national development at compensation rates determined by the state.<sup>15</sup> Tremewan mentions that huge fires (as in Bukit Ho Swee) would break out occasionally,

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<sup>10</sup> James Minchin, *No Man is an Island* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986); Tremewan, *The Political Economy*, 46; Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 113-115.

<sup>11</sup> J F Warren, *RickshawCoolie: A People's History of Singapore 1880-1940* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), 194.

<sup>12</sup> As mentioned previously, Singapore attained self-government from the British in 1959 before full independence in 1965.

<sup>13</sup> HDB, 1964 Annual Report quoted in M Castells, L Goh and R Y-W Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome*, 231.

<sup>14</sup> Chua Beng Huat and Eddie C Y Kuo, "The Making of a New Nation: Cultural Construction and National Identity in Singapore". Paper presented at the 'Cultural Policy and National Identity Workshop' at East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii (June 1990), Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, Working Paper No 104, (1991), 20.

<sup>15</sup> Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, 130.

implying that such ‘fires of convenience’ were deliberately lit by the state’s coercive apparatus.<sup>16</sup> As urban squatters and villages tended to be ethnically homogeneous, the demolition amounted to the “destruction” of ethnic communities and their attendant social practices.<sup>17</sup> The subsequent dispersal was intensified by the first-come first-served rule without regard to ethnic group membership in the allocation of public housing flats, a move that literally prevented members of the same ethnic groups from living together.<sup>18</sup> According to Minchin this dispersal of the ethnic communities involved “breaking up ...communities based on affinities of ‘race’, clan, religion, language and dialect or on generations of friendly contact and shared work, and transferring the fragments into compact areas that are easy to monitor and easy to isolate should the need arise”.<sup>19</sup> The consequences, according to Chua and Kuo as well as other writers, were that colonial communities were deprived of specific social supports and networks (for example, extended family), forcing them to rebuild community with multiethnic strangers with whom they had apparently little in common. However the state countered these criticisms by insisting that the integration of all ethnic groups would “increase inter-ethnic understanding and avoid potential race riots”.<sup>20</sup>

It can be argued that the fundamental rationale behind public housing in Singapore is based on the dynamics of first constructing a ‘racial’ categorization of the ethnic communities, then allocating flats according to this socially constructed model so that, in the words of Anthony King, “local environments could be modeled and controlled in accordance with an assumed ‘public good’”.<sup>21</sup> Public housing estates were to become integrated, with a strict ethnic and social mix maintained through the HDB’s allocation policies that would bring “all the ‘races’ and social groups closer together while allowing each group to practice its own beliefs and

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<sup>16</sup> Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, 47.

<sup>17</sup> Chua Beng Huat and Eddie C Y Kuo, “The Making of a New Nation”, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> James Minchin, *No Man is an Island*, 249.

<sup>20</sup> Chua Beng Huat and Eddie C Y Kuo, “The Making of a New Nation”, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony King, *Re-presenting the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the Twenty-first Century Metropolis* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 209-210.

customs”.<sup>22</sup> In early 1989, then Housing Minister S Dhanabalan described in Parliament the problem as it had stood in 1960, the year when the Board had been set up:

Various sections of our population at that time were gathered in different pockets distinguishable by their racial or dialect groups. The Malays, for example, were concentrated in Geylang Serai, Eunos and a few other areas. The Indians were gathered in the Serangoon Road and Naval Base areas. The Chinese were fragmented into dialect groups each with its own enclave... Each [ethnic] group was fiercely proud of its own identity and defended its narrow interests stoutly. Each clung to its own clan or dialect community for security. There was no social cohesion. We were a divided society ... The massive public housing effort gave us the opportunity to mix the population. We made sure that every HDB new town and estate had a balanced mix of racial groups.<sup>23</sup>

This ‘racial’ balance was the desired objective of the state and was attained by a balloting process whereby applicants of all ethnic groups could choose to live in the area of their choice. Other than the bilingual education system designed to promote multiracialism and language skills (see Chapter 7.3), public housing became the main platform for the promotion of ‘racial’ mixing since a typical HDB block contained members of all ethnic groups, thereby preventing the formation of ethnic enclaves. The HDB thereby became the state’s cornerstone for economic development as well as its social engineering instrument par excellence to eliminate Singapore’s slums and racial enclaves, generate a sense of national loyalty, engineer a strong work ethic, improve its international image, and stimulate employment and economic activity. Several scholars have argued that, although the public housing programme has been highly successful in providing the population with affordable housing on a massive scale, it has also served as a form of social control.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Ooi Giok Ling, Sharon Siddique and Soh Kay Cheng, *The Management of Ethnic Relations in Public Housing Estates* (Singapore: The Institute of Policy Studies, 1993), 11.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in *The Straits Times* of 7 January 1989.

<sup>24</sup> Minchin, *No Man is an Island*; Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*; David Brown, “Globalisation, Ethnicity and the Nation-State: The Case of Singapore,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 52, 1 (1998): 35-46.

Beyond merely providing shelter for the masses, the housing programme enabled the state to achieve its ideological goals, namely, the promotion of economic development, social integration, acceptable social values, economic discipline and the maintenance of political legitimacy and hegemonic dominance. Consequently, employment and economic activity were stimulated through the massive building programme while binding people to sell their labour through a home-ownership policy which made them mortgagers who were then required to repay heavy housing loans through compulsory Central Provident Fund deductions from their income. Such a welfare policy was calculated to render owners 'tenants of the state' and has enabled the state to exercise tight bureaucratic and hegemonic control of its flat-dwellers through a system of surveillance and monitoring procedures.<sup>25</sup> According to Chih, drawing upon the work of Foucault, the largely standardized public housing environment can be seen as a Panopticon into which individuals and households are slotted, thereby facilitating their discipline and supervision".<sup>26</sup> This dependence on the state ultimately meant that owners were obliged to vote for the PAP-dominated government, as failure to do so would result in the state threatening to withdraw its provision of particular goods and services. The PAP threat became a reality when in the run-up to the 1985 and subsequent General Elections it warned constituencies that voting for the opposition would mean that they could be deprived of upgrading facilities for their flats. Chua is of the view that the state's monopolistic intervention in the public housing market and the concomitant dependency of the citizens on the state means that the state "becomes more and more absolute" and that "[a]s this absolute dependency deepens, the citizens as public housing consumers become increasingly vulnerable and subject to social regulations tied to other social policies, beyond housing issues".<sup>27</sup>

Despite state dispersal, it soon became clear that people continued to drift towards 'racial' enclaves, at least in terms of interacting privately on the basis of networks within their own ethnic groups. Social surveys conducted by the HDB

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<sup>25</sup> Chua Beng Huat, "Public Housing Residents as Clients of the State," *Housing Studies* 15, 1 (Jan. 2000): 45.

<sup>26</sup> Chih Hoong Sin, "Segregation and Marginalisation within Public Housing: The Disadvantaged in Bedok New Town, Singapore," *Housing Studies* 17, 2 (2002): 269.

<sup>27</sup> Chua Beng Huat, "Public Housing Residents."

found that residents' social ties were still with relatives, friends, fellow-workers and others of the same ethnic group who often lived some distance away. Residents also used sales, purchases and apartment exchanges to move closer to members of their own ethnic group. It appears that given a free choice, individuals normally choose to congregate with others who they see as being of their own ethnic group. The result was a tendency towards a regrouping of the ethnic communities that had been deliberately broken up by the state's resettlement programme. While the policy had been to encourage a general ethnic integration in HDB estates, it had allowed people a greater degree of choice of location. Consequently by the late 1980s ethnic concentrations based on social and historical continuities had resulted in areas like Bedok, Eunos, Woodlands, Tampines, Ayer Rajah, Taman Jurong and Teban Gardens becoming predominantly Malay, Bukit Merah, Henderson, Tiong Bahru, Ang Mo Kio and Hougang being mainly Chinese, while Kampong Java and Yishun more populated by Indians (see chart below).<sup>28</sup>

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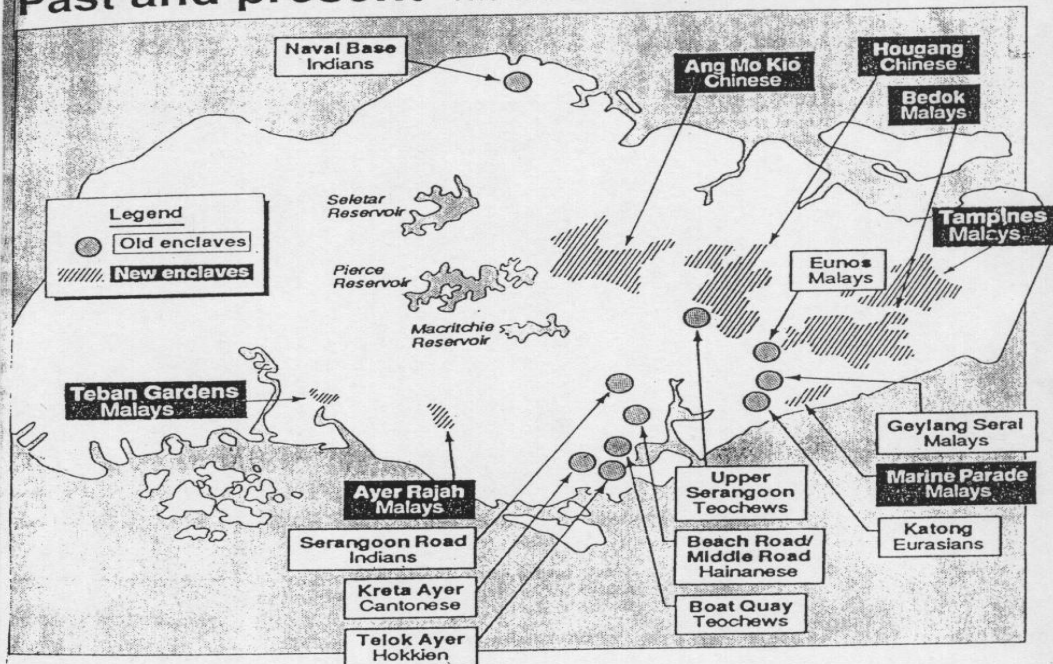
<sup>28</sup> Extracted from Parliamentary Debates 1989 (columns 721-722).





STRAITS TIMES  
7 JAN 1989

## Past and present The old and the new enclaves



### 7.2.2 Ethnic quotas (1 March 1989 to date)

The state saw this tendency towards ethnic clustering as contrary to its declared policy of multiracialism and 'racial' tolerance. Voicing the concerns of the government, the Housing Minister remarked that a disturbing trend was the reemergence of "racial enclaves" with some HDB estates attracting people of a particular race. He singled out Malay applicants as wanting to live in Bedok/Tampines, traditionally Malay strongholds, while Chinese prefer to move to estates like Ang Mo Kio/Hougang. This "regrouping along racial lines", to quote the Minister, was threatening to undermine "social and racial integration", adding that a balanced "racial" and social mix would help avoid "racial and social tensions" and ensure "inter-racial" harmony among the "races". Stressing this, the Minister further added:

Mixing the various communities in proportions that approximate the general population has given us racial tolerance and harmony for more than 20 years. To allow the races to regroup now would be to go back to the pre-1965 period when there were racial enclaves and racial riots.<sup>29</sup>

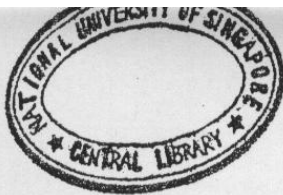
Accordingly, on 1 March 1989 the state announced new measures to enforce ethnic quotas, again demonstrating the continued significance of ‘race’ and ethnicity in Singapore society. The purpose of this ethnic quota policy in public housing was to achieve a ‘balanced racial mix’ by eradicating ethnic enclaves that were now showing signs of reemerging. While the concern for a ‘balanced mix’ is arguably common rhetoric in many countries, in the case of Singapore the policy is in line with the state’s ‘putting in place’ philosophy (mentioned early in this chapter) that constitutes the basis of the various ‘race’-based instruments of social engineering. The new quota policy set a maximum limit on the percentage of Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others allowed in each neighbourhood and housing block to correspond with the supposed racial mix of the country’s population as a whole: that is, 78% Chinese, 14% Malay, and 7% Indians – the ‘race’ categories specified in the founding tenet of multiracialism.

Under this policy of a ‘balanced racial mix’, the quota for each of the officially recognized ethnic groups is monitored and maintained by imposing constraints on the flat owner’s freedom to sell his house so that the ethnic balance is maintained. Residents (other than Chinese) should therefore resell their flat only to someone of their own ethnic group, particularly if the Chinese have reached their quota.<sup>30</sup> In other words, owners can resell their flats in a block only to someone of their own ethnic group that is not already over-represented in the block. Thus, for example, a Malay can sell only to his/her own racial group so that the national demographic balance is maintained in the block (see chart below).

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<sup>29</sup> *The Straits Times*, 12 February 1989.

<sup>30</sup> One of the unintended consequences of HDB’s resale policy was that it also benefited the Chinese in another race-based dimension. Hong Kongers were granted permanent residence status in the run-up to the 1997 take-over by China based on the state’s policy of encouraging immigration from Hong Kong to maintain Singapore’s racial proportions. The result was that many Hong Kongers promptly bought HDB flats, waited for prices to rise, sold their flats for a handsome profit, gave up their PR and returned to Hong Kong with the profit. Also see Chapter 6.5 on Chineseness.



## Who flat owners can sell to under new rules

### In a neighbourhood with too many Chinese...

... a Chinese owner can sell his flat to a buyer from any race.



But non-Chinese owners must sell to non-Chinese buyers only.



### In a neighbourhood with too many Malays...

... a Malay owner can sell to a buyer from any race.



But non-Malay owners must sell to non-Malay buyers only.



### In a neighbourhood with too many Indians...

...an Indian owner can sell to a buyer from any race.

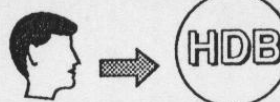


But non-Indian owners must sell to non-Indian buyers only.



### LAST RESORT

If an owner cannot sell his flat in the market, the HDB will buy it back at posted price.



KEY:



Chinese



Malays



Indians & others

This forced inter-ethnic mix extends to the entire housing estate to prevent the formation of 'racial' enclaves. According to then Minister of National Development, Teh Cheang Wan, such an arrangement was necessary for the "long-term stability of the nation" and was "a small price to pay in order to ensure that we do build a cohesive, better integrated society in Singapore".<sup>31</sup> He further assured the public that it would be applied "fairly, across the board to all races" in keeping with the state's multiracial objective and reiterated that the policy should be a microcosm of Singapore's ethnic mix and integration.

Interaction between the various ethnic communities and with the state has been a vital aspect of multiethnic housing in Singapore ever since. While there is general consensus from Singaporeans of all ethnicities that multiethnic living reinforces traditional family values and is good for social cohesion and the ultimate promotion of an overarching national identity, the personal responses of many of my minority ethnic informants, particularly Malays and Indians, indicate a general ambivalence towards the Chinese, the dominant ethnic majority. This ambivalence is predominantly visible in social, cultural and religious matters that basically define and differentiate between the various ethnic groups. Most of my non-Chinese informants reject the policy on the grounds that it discriminates and marginalizes them on account of their ethnicity. They argue that the state shows partiality towards the Chinese majority at their expense, even though the government has assured the public that this was not so. The government, they contend, was particularly worried that it was the minorities that had a tendency to form ethnic enclaves causing potential for racial friction. As minority groups they say that they have an equal stake in the country with the Chinese who, because of their numerical majority, form the dominant group *in every housing block*. Indeed, ironically the housing quota system made every estate an ethnic Chinese enclave. Their unanimous perception is that the policy goes against the grain of the state's declared multiracial policy of cultural and family values as they cannot hope to buy flats near their relatives. Their overall feeling is that the state is being extremely authoritarian and encroaching into their private lives and rights. Public housing policies have therefore become a site for political contestation with the ethnic quota policy ranking as a key issue among the

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<sup>31</sup> *The Straits Times*, 12 February 1989.

minority Malay and Indian communities in “national issues most interested in”, as I will demonstrate in the ensuing paragraphs.<sup>32</sup>

Government leaders agree that the ethnic quota requirements have hampered the sale of HDB flats by minority groups.<sup>33</sup> While the policy applies to all Singaporeans irrespective of ethnicity, home owners from minority ethnic groups say they are the hardest hit when the quotas are filled because they can then sell only to one of their own ‘race’. They tend to lose out financially because of the limited market. This is their main point of contention about the state’s racial politics on housing policy. Bishan, according to a *Straits Times* article of 17 October 2005, is an illustration of an area where most of the blocks have already reached the limit for Chinese owners. Consequently a Malay or an Indian home owner there can sell his flat only to his own ethnic group, making the sale more difficult. The problem, as my research shows, is particularly acute for these minority communities as often they find that, because of numerical limitations, they are not able to get ready buyers for their flats. Only if the Chinese have not yet reached their allowed quota is it possible for the minorities to attempt to sell their flat to them. But, on a practical basis, my interviewees complain, selling the flat to a Chinese is fraught with difficulty. This is because the Chinese prefer to buy a flat from a fellow Chinese because of their attitude to *feng shui* (geomancy) and other cultural considerations. While the Chinese sometimes reluctantly purchase a flat from an Indian resident, buying from a Malay is almost non-existent. Indians and Malays therefore find that they are saddled with a property that they cannot readily sell in the open market. This is because of their perception that ‘race’ and race consciousness have been factored into the housing market by the state, leading to a “buy and sell by race” policy. They generally argue that the housing policy discriminates against the minority ethnic communities. An Indian resident, 58 year-old Alagappan, residing in an HDB apartment in the Little India area is particularly incensed: “The Chinese refused to buy my flat because they said it smelt of bad curry... . I think this is just an excuse... they are simply racist and anti-Indian... . I had endless trouble selling my flat”. Ibadullah, a 65 year-old retired Malay hawker, is convinced that the Chinese refuse to buy his flat because they think

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<sup>32</sup> Chiew Seen Kong and Tan Ern Ser, *The Singaporean: Ethnicity, National Identity and Citizenship*, (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies, 1990).

<sup>33</sup> *The Straits Times*, 17 October 2005.

it is possessed by evil spirits. He protests: “They [the Chinese] think we are medicine-men weaving black magic on others... . How can they be so mean? They just cannot tolerate us [meaning Malays] because of our race and religion”. These minorities frame their concerns on the basis of their perception that the state’s race-based housing policy has been divisive and that the Chinese have used their ‘race’ and overwhelming numbers to dominate and stereotype the ethnic minorities. Suresh Kumar is yet another Indian resident caught up in the ethnic quota bind. He says:

Seven years ago I bought my 3-room flat from my in-laws as they could not sell it because of the ethnic quota policy. Now, seven years later, I face the same problem. The ‘small price to pay’ argument by the Minister is way too big for me because I cannot upgrade to a bigger flat even as my family gets bigger. I cannot sell it to a Chinese because they have already reached their quota in my block and neighbourhood. Neither am I able to get anybody from my own racial group. An Indian who did come forward was not prepared to pay the market price. What am I to do? The HDB says officially that it would help in cases such as mine but I don’t see any help forthcoming although I have already told them of my problem.

Such concerns are also compounded by the perception that Chinese dominance and the perception of Chineseness in all housing estates means that the image of ‘racial enclaves’ actually refers to the minorities and that the policy is really intended to prevent their concentration - hence the feeling of discrimination and being disadvantaged. Malays, in particular being both indigenous yet remaining on the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder (see Tables 18-22 in Chapter 8.2), particularly feel a sense of community fragmentation and discrimination because of the perceived Chinese fear of Malays and past animosity between these two communities resulting in racial riots on three previous occasions in Singapore’s post-war history, the last in 1969.<sup>34</sup> Rejecting the Government’s concern that ethnic enclaves lead to riots, one Malay respondent says, “Integration and national identity are not automatically achieved just by mixing the races. It cannot be forced and it will come naturally over a period of time.” Noting that the original intention to limit ‘races’ to a prescribed ratio was to promote ‘racial’ tolerance and harmony in line with the state’s multiracial and multicultural policies, Kesavan, a 36-year old

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<sup>34</sup> Malay informants stress that community nearness to their friends and relatives and to the mosque is important for their feelings of happiness and security.

motorcar mechanic contends that the policy has led to segregation and marginalization of the minority communities because it has a pro-Chinese basis. He continues, "The policy ensures a majority of Chinese in every HDB estate, so that they can dominate society and the country. This is not good for racial cohesiveness." In agreement with this view is a 67-year old Indian resident Kasinathan who does not believe that racial integration can come about just by putting people of different ethnicities together. To him there is no spirit of community in his neighbourhood. He says, "When my Chinese neighbour comes back to his flat, he just slams the door shut and makes no effort to get to know his neighbours. When I greet him he just nods and disappears into his flat".

Even when people get along well with their neighbours, they develop no patterns of association as I discovered among some of my respondents. Says one of them, housewife Rani 54: "The mainly Chinese neighbours in my block are merely casual in their friendship with me and my family. They do not seek a deeper friendship. Every now and then I invite them to my house during festivals but they prefer to meet and talk in the lifts or in the void deck. May be they are so conscious of their race and mine that they feel uncomfortable in interacting closer". Besides the state's primary objective of discouraging the formation of ethnic enclaves, the overriding philosophy of mixing the various ethnic groups in a localized setting is to foster closer interaction between members of these groups as a way to achieve greater ethnic integration for the purposes of nation building. The state believes that the greater the frequency of interaction, the more they will integrate. My survey shows that, with exceptions, people accept and tolerate their neighbours of other ethnicities though they do not expect to move any closer.

Another grouse of the minorities involves those who fall under the category of 'Others'. The HDB's policy of clustering 'Indians and Others' into one group means that both compete for "a now smaller piece of the pie" (as one of my respondents put it). Such a scenario puts both the Indians and the 'Other' communities like the Eurasians into a distinct disadvantage. The Eurasians, for example, forming a very small percentage of the population, have to compete with a considerably larger Indian base. One of my Indian respondents also argues that the policy fails to recognize the tremendous ethnic and cultural differences that exist between these two communities. Prabhakaran, a 67 year-old Indian government retiree, says: "We are already a minority and yet we have to share with the Eurasians and other small communities

who are so different from us”. This response is echoed by a Eurasian, Fonseka, a 54 year-old technical draughtsman, who thinks that his community has almost no chance to buy a flat as Indians, by virtue of their numbers, have a greater chance to do so. Over all, the minority ethnic communities appear aggrieved with the state for not giving them the freedom to live where they wanted. Being very family and community-oriented, they have always lived near their kith and kin as it gives them a sense of security and close interaction. They also oppose the policy on the grounds that it contradicts the government’s frequent exhortations for family and community support, filial piety and maintenance of traditional culture and values.

On a general basis, my Malay and Indian respondents give the impression that housing policy is one of several ‘social engineering’ areas in which they perceive excessive intervention, coercion, control and authoritarianism on the part of the PAP government in the public and private lives of citizens. However, it must be acknowledged that despite their reservations on the racial quota policy many of my Malay and Indian informants welcome multiethnic living in HDB estates. As reported by Purushotam, “people are not only adjusting to their new environment, but they prefer it to their former residential patterns”.<sup>35</sup> Unlike the Chinese who appear to consider ‘race’ important in interethnic relationships, many Indians I interviewed believe that the more people interact with their neighbours the greater the interaction between the ethnic groups as a whole. They admit to accepting the status quo as the only solution for closer ethnic interaction and the potential for national identity in a multiracial Singapore. Most of them have already adjusted to and accept other ethnics as their immediate neighbours. Managing and celebrating differences are, according to them, part of daily living.

Nevertheless research has shown that the issue of ‘constraint choice’ resulting from the ethnic quota policy has segregated and marginalized the Indian community, especially those from the lower-income group, more than the other ethnic groups.<sup>36</sup> Realizing that the policy affected Indians more than the Chinese, the National Development Minister had, as early as 1989 and again in 1997, agreed that the Government would review the policy to see whether there were other ways to achieve

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<sup>35</sup> Sharon Siddique and Nirmala Purushotam, *Singapore’s Little India: Past, Present and Future* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990).

<sup>36</sup> Chih Hoong Sin, “Segregation and Marginalisation within Public Housing”.



ethnic integration without causing undue hardship to residents.<sup>37</sup> Indian MP R Sinnakaruppan even suggested in Parliament on 25 July 1997 that the ethnic quota be applied only to areas such as Little India where there was a reasonably high demand for flats from Indians, and a combined quota with other ‘races’ elsewhere. In speaking of the plight of Indians and others (meaning Eurasians and other minorities) in selling their HDB flats, the delicate matter of ‘race’ and ‘race’ relations was also strongly alluded to by other Indian backbenchers in Parliament, signifying the importance and sensitivity of ‘racial’ politics in a multiethnic society such as Singapore.<sup>38</sup> A call for a review of the HDB’s ethnic quota policy has repeatedly been made both in Parliament and outside. However, the state has said that it “does not intend to tinker” with the policy, thereby ignoring the discontent of the minority communities.<sup>39</sup>

### 7.3 ‘Race’, Education and Language Policy

As with housing, the “main social control mechanism for putting people in their places physically”, education and language policies have had similar but even more far-reaching objectives.<sup>40</sup> While public housing is confined those affected by the housing policy<sup>41</sup>, education and language policy applies to all Singaporeans and are the chief vehicles for instilling linguistic discipline among the multiethnic population – in the words of Wilson, education is a major instrument of “social engineering”.<sup>42</sup>

The colonial regime had ensured that their education policy kept the ‘races’ divided with English education being available to the privileged few who were employed as “clerks for Western commercial houses and the government”.<sup>43</sup> The educational needs of the three major ethnic groups were left to their own resources with little interference or control from the British administration. Four separate

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<sup>37</sup> *The Straits Times*, 17 February 1989 and 29 July 1997.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 July 1997.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 October 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, 74.

<sup>41</sup> There is also private housing for those who can afford it.

<sup>42</sup> Wilson, *Social Engineering in Singapore*.

<sup>43</sup> Peter A Busch, *Legitimacy and Ethnicity: A Case Study of Singapore* (Lexington: Heath, 1974), 28.

educational streams, namely, English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil existed under British colonial practice, promoting “ethnic exclusiveness” and “conflicting ethnic, social and political orientations” that supposedly had divisive effects on the population.<sup>44</sup> A further division created by the British was the class gulf between the English-educated and Chinese-educated Chinese, a divide that was to create problems for the post-independent state as it sought to defuse the tensions between the two groups. The situation that the British left behind on independence was therefore one in which language and ‘race’ had been manipulated by them for the purpose of achieving political and social control of the population as well as for keeping the ‘races’ apart. In this chapter I will demonstrate that this situation has been maintained in a modified fashion by the post-independent state to achieve similar hegemonic, political and social controls.

Education has long been relied on by the nation state as a crucial tool of “national-building”.<sup>45</sup> The schools are consciously used as “agencies of political socialization” creating among students “loyalty to the republic” and “appreciation of racial and religious tolerance”, in other words both a Singaporean national and a separate ethnic identification.<sup>46</sup> More clearly than any other social engineering initiative in Singapore, the school system expresses Singapore’s approach to multiracialism and nation building, bringing together Singaporeans of all ethnic groups and classes, and affecting almost every family in significant and profound ways. It is in the schools, more than in any other institution, that the abstract values of multiracialism and of Singaporean identity are given concrete form. The symbolic daily flag raising and lowering ritual along with the reciting of the national pledge and the singing of the national anthem are all aimed at instilling loyalty and a sense of

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<sup>44</sup> Raj Vasil, *Governing Singapore: Democracy and National Development* (St Leonards, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 91.

<sup>45</sup> Jon S T Quah, “Singapore: Toward a National Identity” in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1977* (Singapore: FEP International Ltd., 1977), 212; Saravanan Gopinathan, “Singapore’s Language Policies: Strategies for a Plural Society” in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1979* (Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd., 1979), 280.

<sup>46</sup> Then Lian Mee, *Political Socialization and the Implication for Curricula Content in Secondary Schools in Singapore* (Ph.D. diss., Teachers’ College, Columbia University, 1975) 1; *150 Years of Education in Singapore* (1969), 59.

national identity.<sup>47</sup> These school activities emotionally reinforce the substance of political socialization contained in the state-designed school curriculum. So effective are the schools in this respect that a critic of the PAP once described the Singapore education system as “the most important item in the programme of thought control”.<sup>48</sup> Most of the domestic political issues of the country, relations between ethnic groups, meritocracy, the future security of the nation, and the requirements for economic development are reflected in education policy. Frequent fine-tuning of education and language policies has therefore taken place to reflect constant social change and a rapidly changing national and global economy.

One of the major decisions was to introduce bilingualism – meaning English and a mother tongue language - in schools in 1966, soon after independence. Instilling nationalistic values to citizens through educational and language instruction was the rationale for the formulation of the bilingual policy, the assumption being that a bilingual citizen would be able to communicate and interact not only with his or her own community, but also with members of other linguistic groups, thereby fostering tolerance, racial harmony, mutual respect and integration. Chan and Evers set out the rationale for the bilingual policy:

Each segment of Singapore’s population is too distinct and exhibits too strong a cultural tradition to warrant any hope that these traditions would merge into a single cultural and national identity. The pragmatic solution was to create a double identity: a somewhat subdued cultural identity based on the respective local language and a national identity based on English.<sup>49</sup>

However an overwhelming response among my Indian respondents is that the mother tongue policy seemed to compartmentalize children by ‘race’. “Today I see school children mixing only with children of the same race. At recess time, in the school field, at gatherings, in the canteen, and when the children scramble to get home, we always see this happening. This is not good for national integration”, says Roshini a

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<sup>47</sup> The pledge reads as follows: “We the citizens of Singapore pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language, or religion, to build a democratic society based on justice and equality so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation”.

<sup>48</sup> T J S George, *Lee Kuan Yew’s Singapore* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1984), 136.

<sup>49</sup> Chan Heng Chee and Hans-Dieter Evers, “National Identity and Nation-building in Southeast Asia,” in *Studies in ASEAN Sociology: Urban Society and Social Change*, eds Peter Chen and Hans-Dieter Evers (Singapore: Chopmen Enterprises, 1978), 125.

mother of three. She reminisces that during her school days in Singapore she was not at all conscious of the 'races' of her friends in school. She thinks that the state today was overly emphasizing the peoples' ethnicities.

Bilingualism was also a means of gaining access to Western knowledge and technology without losing familiarity with the language of one's 'race' and culture.<sup>50</sup> The state further justified the policy on the ground that English was a neutral language that would help to minimize cultural and language differences between the ethnic groups. The state's emphasis on industrialization and foreign investment made it imperative that English as the international language of business and commerce should be given prominence, hence its hegemony in multiracial Singapore.<sup>51</sup> Under the bilingual policy therefore all students had to learn English as the main medium of instruction and the first language, and their respective culturally laden mother tongues as their second language. The mother tongue was defined by the father's ethnicity that was in turn defined by the state's rigid racial categories, all these factors being considered fixed and not negotiable. So while English became the dominant language of education, government, commerce and technology, as well as the language in which to express national identity, Chinese (Mandarin), Malay and Tamil became the official mother tongue second language in schools and the language in which to express ethnic identity.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, while Chinese students were required to learn English and Mandarin, regardless of the language spoken in the home, Malays were required to learn English and Malay and Indians were required to learn English and Tamil, notwithstanding the Indian language spoken at home. The reality is that while the second language is a requirement in schools, it is in many cases not the language spoken at home. Chinese speak dialects (like Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka) rather than Mandarin, while many Indians speak their own regional languages unless they are Tamils. English has therefore gained ascendancy over the vernacular

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<sup>50</sup> Saravanan Gopinathan, "Education" in *Government and Politics of Singapore*, ed. Jon S T Quah, Chan Heng Chee and Seah Chee Meow (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), Chapter 9.

<sup>51</sup> Gopinathan, "Towards a National Education System" in *Singapore: Society in Transition*, ed. Riaz Hassan (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976); Wilson, *Social Engineering in Singapore*; Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*.

<sup>52</sup> Mandarin is widely regarded as "the formal language of the Chinese community" (Richard Noss, *Higher Education and Development in Southeast Asia* 3, 2 Language Policy (UNESCO: The International Association of University, 1967), 147; Standard Malay is widely used by all Malays; Tamil is the regional language spoken by about 65% of all Indians in Singapore.

languages as the most important language spoken in public, a situation that has contributed to the erosion of the vernacular languages despite their being presented by the state as an essential component of ethnic identity. To this problem, the Prime Minister has responded as follows: “If we use only English and allow our mother tongue to degenerate, we will in time, lose our values and cultural heritage”.<sup>53</sup> Lee Kuan Yew emphasizes the importance of the bilingual policy thus:

...if we abandon our bilingual policy, we must be prepared to pay the grievous price of becoming a people who have lost their cultural self-identity. Once we lose this emotional and cultural ballast, we will cease to be a separate and distinct community, with pride in ourselves. Instead we shall become pseudo-Westernised, alienated from our Asian background.<sup>54</sup>

Lying at the core of ethnic management, bilingualism in education has been a constant theme since independence, although it has been interpreted differently at different stages of Singapore’s development.

To ensure that racial diversity led to ethnic interaction and cohesion, the state also established integrated schools, admitting students from all ethnic segments and according English a special status. At the same time limits were set to the proportion of minority students permitted in schools.<sup>55</sup> This was a radical departure from the colonial period when schools were largely segregated along different language streams and there was very little interaction between the various ethnic groups. The rationale was that Singaporeans should “retain their cultural identification through education in their own language... and gain a common ground through the English language”, though in practice most students learn their ethnic group language in school only as a second language.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *The Straits Times*, 16 November 2005.

<sup>54</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, “Importance of the Chinese Language”, *Speeches: A Bi-Monthly Selection of Ministerial Speeches* 13, 6 (Ministry of Communications and Information, Singapore, November-December 1989), 4.

<sup>55</sup> Ooi et al., *The Management of Ethnic Relations in Public Housing Estates*; Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*; Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*; Purushotam, “Disciplining Difference: Race in Singapore” in *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and Politics of Representation*, ed. Joel S Kahn (New York: St. Martin's Press; Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998)..

<sup>56</sup> Chan Heng Chee and Hans-Dieter Evers, “National Identity and Nation-building in Singapore”, 123-124.

The principle of multiracialism and multiculturalism also assumes that each ‘race’ has a distinct culture reinforced by and intimately connected to its own language. This is one way ethnic groups constitute themselves, language being presented as the “verbalization of the shared beliefs, fraternal bonds, [and] communal historic ties... of a people”.<sup>57</sup> In line with this principle, the new nation state after independence proclaimed four official languages – English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil for Singaporeans, one language each for the major local ‘races’. These four languages are those recognized in Singapore’s education system. The four languages are also freely used in Parliament, though English remains the working language of the bureaucratic machinery. Each language medium was “assured of a respectable position in the national education system” and there was to be equality in government financial assistance.<sup>58</sup>

Racial categories therefore have determined language choices of children in schools under the bilingual policy.<sup>59</sup> With the linkage of a language to a broadly defined racial category the prescribing of Mandarin as the second language for the Chinese has not only served to preserve Chinese dominance and unite the Chinese against the ethnic minorities, it has also proved divisive according to perceptions from the minority communities. In contemporary Singapore ethnicity partially determines social mobility, hence the ability to speak English-Mandarin is more favoured than English-Malay or English-Tamil for employment or business opportunities as evidenced by my respondents in subsequent paragraphs. This English-Mandarin equation is considered by the state as essential for national development, these languages being identified as the languages of commerce as well as for the cohesiveness of the majority community and thus necessary for national survival. Hence job advertisements in the print media often specify a preference for candidates

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<sup>57</sup> Charles F Gallagher, “North African Problems and Prospects: Language and Identity” in *Language Problems of Developing Nations*, eds. Joshua Fishman, Charles Ferguson and Jyotirindra Das Gupta (New York: John Wiley, 1968), 145.

<sup>58</sup> Ahmad Mattar, “The Singapore Malays: Their Education and Role in National Development” in *People’s Action Party 1954 – 1979* (Singapore: Central Executive Committee, People’s Action Party, 1979), 81.

<sup>59</sup> Nirmala Purushotam, “Language and Linguistic Policies” in *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, eds. K S Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 513-517.

proficient in English and Mandarin. By contrast the other official ethnic languages, Malay and Tamil, are relegated to the family setting or private gatherings.

The association between ‘race’ and language was further underlined with the ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign of the late 1970s, the most ambitious project of Singapore’s language planning and social engineering. This measure to revive Chinese culture and Chineseness was the result of agitation by Chinese-educated groups, leading a Singapore educationist to comment that it was “a balancing move to reassure the Chinese community that their cohesiveness, cultural identity, and language claims still remained a primary concern of the government”.<sup>60</sup> The dominance of English had also upset those who supported Chinese education. Vasil argues that the introduction of Mandarin and subsequently the promotion of Confucianism by the PAP Government was to appease the Chinese-educated who felt alienated and threatened by the importance given to the English language.<sup>61</sup> Several authors like Vasil and Chua point out that the publication of *Ideology and National Competitiveness: An Analysis of Nine Countries* by George Lodge and Ezra Vogel, which claimed that predominantly Confucianist societies were likely to be more competitive than the ‘individualistic’ nations of the West, was an influential study for the PAP leadership.<sup>62</sup>

The Chinese-educated had also perceived that the dominant status of the Chinese community was being undermined. A new national socio-ethnic rationale therefore had to be developed to sustain social stability and ethnic harmony for the purposes of economic development based on a survivalist ideology. In line with this need the Goh Education Report reiterated as follows:

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<sup>60</sup> Gopinathan, “Language Policy Changes, 1979-92: Politics and Pedagogy” in *Language, Society, and Education in Singapore: Issues and Trends* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>61</sup> Chinese-speaking Singaporeans represented a significantly large part of the Chinese community. The PAP leaders were concerned that their earlier emphasis on creating an English-speaking Singapore may have alienated the Chinese-speaking community. Chinese anxiety would receive support from the controversial theories of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – that linguistic development and cognitive development interact with each other. The hypothesis lays stress on the major role language plays in the process of concept formation and thought.

<sup>62</sup> Raj Vasil, *Asianising Singapore: The PAP’s Management of Ethnicity* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1995); Chua Beng Huat, *Culture, Multiracialism and National Identity in Singapore* (Singapore: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 1995).

One way to overcoming the dangers of deculturalisation is to teach children the historical origins of their culture. Chinese pupils could be taught in the Chinese language in secondary schools early Chinese history...<sup>63</sup>

Lee Kuan Yew had all along believed in the superiority of Chinese culture and race and this belief strengthened his desire to create, what Barr calls, “a Sinocentric form of multiculturalism in Singapore”.<sup>64</sup> In an address to his constituents at a Chinese New Year gathering in March 1978 he says, “Heaven forbid that we lose our own cultures ...”<sup>65</sup> Further championing the cause of Chinese language and culture, Lee launched the Speak Mandarin Campaign on 7 September 1979 and in 1984 reiterated the importance of the campaign. Rather than speak their native dialects like Hokkien, Hakka and Cantonese, Chinese Singaporeans were exhorted to learn Mandarin as their mother tongue. Until the late 1970s and early 80s dialects were commonly spoken among the Chinese in Singapore. This situation was deemed undesirable by a state concerned that if dialects continued to be spoken, the ability of Chinese Singaporeans to learn the bilingual standard English and Mandarin would be affected. The only way to remedy the situation was, in the view of the state, to eliminate dialects. The Chinese also needed a language that would bind them together as a single community. In this way the state has successfully promoted the use of Mandarin as a language to represent the Chinese and has thereby created a more homogeneous ethnolinguistic majority.<sup>66</sup> According to the state, this language was associated as it was with ancient Chinese civilization and having a written script. This was the rationale behind the Speak Mandarin Campaign. Promotion of Mandarin in Singapore has also the tacit objective of alignment with mainland China, given the socio-political, economic and strategic benefits accruing to Singapore. The campaign has been one of the nation’s most notable public campaigns with constant state promotion and political speeches liberally and hegemonically laced with

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<sup>63</sup> Goh Keng Swee and the Education Study Team, *Report on the Ministry of Education 1978* (Singapore: Singapore National Printers, 1979), 1-5.

<sup>64</sup> Michael D Barr, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000), 157.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Chia Poteik, “Lee Explains Need to Use Mandarin”, *The Straits Times*, 13 March, 1978.

<sup>66</sup> Anthea Fraser Gupta, “The Situation of English in Singapore” in *English in New Cultural Contexts: Reflections from Singapore*, eds. Foley, Joseph A, et al (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1998).



metaphors to influence the public and promote the campaigns.<sup>67</sup> Every year a whole month is dedicated to the promotion of this policy and data shows that over the years the use of dialects has shown a significant decrease with Mandarin becoming more widespread. This necessity to promote Mandarin over dialects prompted Lee to say: “English will not be emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue”.<sup>68</sup>

My conversations with people from the minority communities, namely, the Malays, Indians and Eurasians show that while they did not see the importance given to English as a threat to their identity and culture, the Chinese were distinctly concerned that their heritage and identity were in jeopardy.<sup>69</sup> This concern is echoed in the words of then Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, who asked: “What will be the future of 75% of our people who are Chinese whom we find could be losing their bearing?” He went on to say, in an interview with Raj Vasil in late 1992, that unlike the Malays and Indians, the Chinese were in danger of losing their values:

This was because they are educated in English, they travel abroad, they study abroad, and the slightest hiccup over here, they think of emigration. Their bond with the country is not there because the bond to the community is not there. They become individual economic animals, looking for the greenest pasture in the world. Now if that becomes a common phenomenon, where will Singapore be?<sup>70</sup>

Goh Chok Tong told Dr Vasil that the Speak Mandarin campaign was aimed at getting younger Singaporeans to go back to their roots because they were losing their culture. From time to time other PAP leaders have also expressed the need to learn Mandarin. Dr Hong Hai, MP, for example, extolled it as an “insurance against Western cultural colonization”.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> For example, Lee Kuan Yew in his 1984 Speak Mandarin Campaign speech says that “... students from Mandarin-speaking families constantly do better in their examinations than those from dialect-speaking homes... they have no load of dialect words and phrases to carry”. Yet again the use of the metaphor burden with its negative connotations was used by Goh Chok Tong in the 1981 Speak Mandarin Campaign and by other leaders since to discourage the use of dialects. Lee Hsien Loong in a 1988 Speak Mandarin Campaign speech says, “Mandarin is also a major factor retaining our Chinese cultural heritage”.

<sup>68</sup> *The Straits Times*, 22 September 1984.

<sup>69</sup> The Eurasians, forming the biggest component of ‘Others’ in the CMIO framework of multiracialism, are not affected as they speak only English.

<sup>70</sup> Raj Vasil, “Singapore 1992: Community and Change,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1993).

<sup>71</sup> *The Straits Times*, 2 January 1999.

Under the “Speak Mandarin” campaign the use of Mandarin was widely enforced in public places, in government offices and the workplace, on TV and radio, in the naming of public places, in the use of bilingual instead of multilingual signs, in the building of Chinese theme parks, in the merging of two main Chinese-medium daily newspapers into a single state-controlled one, and especially in the setting up of the prestigious and elite Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools in 1980 where gifted Chinese students could study Mandarin as a first language besides English.<sup>72</sup> All these measures in the state management of ethnicity are seen by the minority communities as favouring the Chinese at the expense of the minorities and going against the grain of multiracialism by encouraging racial segregation and the “Sinicization of the entire Singapore society rather than of the Chinese only”.<sup>73</sup> Discussions of language, culture, ethnicity and race have raised significant and indeed fundamental issues as I discovered in interviews with many Singaporeans. They raised particular issues about state policies and programmes, some of which are as follows: What about the pressures from a dominant Chinese ethnic population? Will strengthening the place of Chinese language and culture amongst Chinese-speaking Singaporeans sinicise the population? What of the 14% Malay and 7% of the Indian population who do not communicate in Chinese? Non-Chinese speaking Singaporeans argue that the state’s language-planning approach excludes all non-Chinese from the scheme of things addressed by the Speak Mandarin Campaign. Would this lead to a dominant role and over the years a hegemonic role for the Chinese language? Has the status and role of English now been replaced in some areas by an English-Mandarin equation and in other contexts by Mandarin? What elements of Singaporean culture and tradition should then be selected that will be relevant to the minority Indians living in Singapore? What is the status of political representation for Indians in Singapore especially in the politicized Group Representation Constituencies (GRC) in racially integrated constituencies? Four Indian MPs were appointed by the ruling party in the 2001 General Elections but the Indian newspaper *Tamil Murasu* debated

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<sup>72</sup> The SAP is a glaring exception to the declared equal treatment of ‘races’ in the educational system. Conceived by Lee Kuan Yew, it was specially designed to revive Chinese culture and prepared students to be equally proficient in both English and Mandarin.

<sup>73</sup> Lai Ah Eng, *Meanings of Multiethnicity: A Case-study of Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995). 148.

whether their appointments were representative of the Tamil-speaking Indian community as they could speak fluent Mandarin but little or no Tamil.

The Speak Mandarin Campaign is the target of my respondents' ire provoking a spate of responses in the Singapore media and in my interviews with them. In particular the slogan "If you are Chinese, make a statement in Mandarin" was seen by some of the minorities and some English-educated as yet another sign that Singapore was becoming a Chinese state. Though the state subsequently conceded that the campaign had been badly publicized and that the public perception that there was an attempt to get non-Chinese to speak Mandarin was unfounded, the damage had been done resulting in uneasiness and unhappiness among the minorities. Says one interviewee Lal Bangah, a 47-year old lab assistant:

My son entered NS [National Service] last year. During his Basic Military Training and in his subsequent postings, he was mostly with English-educated Chinese Singaporean NS men with whom he had to interact. Yet most of them spoke in Mandarin in his presence and even when engaged in general conversation. Whenever he asked them to speak in English they would say, "Sorry but we are more comfortable talking in Mandarin. Sometimes instructions and briefings are given in Mandarin too. The situation was quite different when I was serving my own NS about 20 years ago. I recall that one of its original objectives was to foster a sense of national integration and all of us spoke in English, the language common to all of us. At the same time I was never conscious that I was from a minority community. My teammates and I were from different racial groups but this fact simply did not register in our minds and we mixed freely as a result. But nowadays I see compartmentalisation among the various ethnic groups because of the Government's overemphasis on ethnic consciousness. I strongly believe that unless Singaporeans today reach out to those of other races and make them feel comfortable in their presence, we will end up retreating into separate linguistic and racial enclaves. And the kind of national identity that my contemporaries and I had will be less prevalent. Certainly this is not the way to achieve national integration and identity. One of the purposes of the bilingual education policy is that Singaporeans should be fluent in English and their mother tongue. If Chinese Singaporeans feel more comfortable talking in Mandarin than in English in a mixed gathering, what about the employment

prospects of non-Chinese Singaporeans? I say this because I find a lot of jobs advertised nowadays in the newspapers calling for applicants “conversant in both English and Mandarin”, even though many of them are back-room positions requiring no knowledge of Mandarin.

Such a perception is prevalent among many of my participants who felt that the state’s emphasis on the Speak Mandarin Campaign had put the minority communities at a disadvantage in getting jobs as they did not know Mandarin. Stressing the need for more sensitivity, Lal Bangah continues,

Use of the mother tongue is fine in mono-ethnic settings but in multi-ethnic Singapore, the use of the English medium would serve to unite us all. In such a multiracial setting it is important that we must be sensitive to the interests and sentiments of other ethnic groups.

A similar grievance came from another Indian Kamala, a 22-year old female National University of Singapore student who had been given the duty of recording minutes of a university club’s committee meeting. She says she felt hurt and was at a loss when her classmates started talking in Mandarin even though they were aware that she had to take down the minutes in English.

The following responses are examples that further typify the resentment the minorities have towards the emphasis given by the state to the Chinese language and culture.

Says Ganesan, a 40 year-old Tamil-speaking male Indian engineer, working in a construction company:

...this policy is so discriminatory... why is not Tamil given equal importance? Why can’t they [the Government] not have a ‘Speak Tamil’ or ‘Speak Malay’ campaign also?” They do not practice equality when talking about our multiracial society.

His grievance is echoed by lawyer 46 year-old Nathan who considers that policies deferred from the rights enshrined in the Singapore Constitution. Quoting the legal freedom to learn languages, he asks, “Why must my child learn only Tamil and not say Chinese or Malay or Russian?” He is also upset that though Tamil was one of the official languages it was often absent in many official publications.

Sasitharan, a 34-year old accountant:

I tried to enroll my son for Primary 1 a few years ago but discovered that some top primary schools offer only Chinese as the mother tongue. I’m against this

policy for two reasons. Firstly, it creates Chinese elitism, and secondly it is not consistent with the Government's policy of equal opportunities for all as minority races cannot consider these schools. How do we expect to achieve racial integration if we have such policies?

Vidya, a 50 year-old female Indian government clerk:

Sometimes in the office my boss mutters some phrases and jokes in Mandarin during meetings and I, along with my Malay colleague, feel left out... This is not fair. It is also rude and openly discriminates against minorities.

Salleh Ibrahim, a 58 year-old male Malay stall owner:

They [the Chinese] forget that we are the *bumiputras* (meaning natives), yet they want to impose their language and their Chineseness on Singaporeans just because they are the dominant community.

Another Malay, 25-year old Idris, a government technical assistant:

You know why Malays cannot take Chinese as a second language in schools? The Government wants everyone especially the Chinese to stay connected to their ethnic groups. I see that this policy is mainly to protect and improve the position of the Chinese and not the other races. They [the Government] make it look like a fair policy by encouraging Malays to take up Malay as their second language and Indians their language. Individual wishes or parents' wishes do not count. Only race counts (underlined by me). What about equality that they preach under multiracialism?

Yet another Malay, Fatimah, a 47 year-old female telephonist:

When I applied for the job of clerk in a company, they asked whether I could speak Mandarin, even though my job did not require attending to the public. Why this discrimination on account of race? Might as well abolish Malay and Tamil and have only Chinese taught as a second language in schools. May be then we would have better chances of getting employment. But may be not!

Almost all my respondents imply that 'race' is still in the way of equal social interaction. The fact that 'race' plays a pivotal role in the state's language policy is underlined in this episode recounted by Jayabalan, a 26-year old accountancy graduate from the Nanyang Technological University:

At a recent interview for the position of accountant in a public relations firm, I was asked whether I could speak Chinese. I explained that I could not only

...speak but also could write Mandarin and showed them my certificates. Yet I was not chosen for the job.

He contends that he was passed over because he belonged to a minority 'race'.

My respondents are therefore unanimous in feeling threatened and sidelined from the national project by perceptions that knowledge of Mandarin was expected in order to be considered for employment and ethnic quotas. They perceive that ethnic favouritism towards the Chinese and entrenched social advantages for the Chinese disadvantaged the minorities in Singapore. They also expected more pressure from the dominant Chinese population and a hegemonic Chinese language and culture, as respondent Kumaran, a 62-year old retiree observes, "I don't know where this is all leading to. Why can't the Government be more sensitive to our feelings and accord equality to all the races?" They also argue that the state's language policies exclude them from social advancement, even though the Government has attempted to allay their fears. They see all these changes as going against the PAP Government's overriding commitment to a multiracial Singapore. Such an attitude is particularly prevalent among the economically depressed Malays who resent the strong reassertion of the Chineseness not only of the Chinese but of Singapore itself. Malay and Tamil-speaking communities raised particular issues with state planning decisions and questioned the roles of their own ethnicities in the multilingual framework. Anxieties felt by the minority communities are also reflected by their MPs – for example, MP Othman Haron Eusofe says that there is an insecure feeling among minority groups that they had not been able to share in Singapore's prosperity, especially in getting lucrative employment in the private sector.<sup>74</sup> Responding to the unhappiness felt by minority communities the Prime Minister has warned employers not to discriminate against non-Chinese by setting Mandarin as a requirement even for jobs that did not need it, but my respondents are not convinced that employers, particularly Chinese companies, would comply.<sup>75</sup>

The issue of SAP schools was another topic drawing a barrage of criticism from respondents who regard this mode of emphasis on the Chinese language as racially motivated and therefore discriminatory. As SAP schools provide Chinese as a first language equally with English and are only meant for bright Chinese students,

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<sup>74</sup> Reported in *The Straits Times* of 17 January 1999.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 16 November 2005.

the minorities see it as a policy of training up an elitist bilingual Chinese class at the expense of the minorities by not giving similar opportunities for bright non-Chinese students. For instance, medical practitioner Dr Sivasothi, 53, questions the motives behind the setting up of these schools. He sees the state's promotion of a Chinese-speaking elite as challenging and even undermining the promotion of "racial tolerance". Besides he feels that the Government is using taxpayers' money "to promote one elite segment of society and not the others [meaning minorities]". He asks, "Do they [the state] think that Indians and Malays are so stupid?" implying that prejudices and stereotypes about minorities dictate Government policy. With SAP schools having better facilities and teachers than normal schools, many interviewees see these schools giving Chinese pupils an unfair advantage over pupils from other ethnic groups. Objecting to the privileging of SAP schools only to Chinese students, one Indian parent suggests that such schools should be opened up to non-Chinese students also. However government leaders have said that this was "totally unnecessary" and that "some [alternative] way must be found for all the bright students of all races to be in the same environment".<sup>76</sup>

Many of my respondents also argue that the compulsory segregation of these SAP students by 'race' undermines the policy of multiracialism because these students do not interact with other ethnic groups. Minorities are particularly vocal about how the SAP schools were harming inter-ethnic mixing. Even a Government MP S Chandra Das was prompted to express his concern saying that he had received feedback that pupils were more "race-conscious" than in the past, more "keenly aware of their racial differences" and not mixing enough with pupils from other ethnic groups. He observed that "we are unwittingly paying another price in terms of inter-racial relations". He feared that with SAP schools nurturing future potential leaders, there could be "serious implications in the way Singapore is governed and run" in the future. The MP also saw that 'race' was unexpectedly segregating pupils in schools according to the second language they took, observing that Indian pupils were discouraged by principals from joining certain schools because Tamil was not taught there during school hours. Stressing that education should aim to foster national consciousness, racial harmony and multiracial values, he said, "Educational policies which tend to create racial divisiveness or result in ethnic groups being isolated from

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<sup>76</sup> *The Straits Times*, 14 June 1990.

each other should be discarded”.<sup>77</sup> However senior Government leaders have repeatedly defended the SAP policy saying that it was a fallacy to argue that SAP students could not mix with other ‘races’.

A minority member writing in the press had suggested that SAP schools should not have been conceived in the first place as such schools did not allow free mixing between the ‘races’.<sup>78</sup> The state however responded to such arguments saying that abolishing SAP schools would not lead to better unity. The Government spokesman rationalized his argument thus: “We never set out to have a homogenized society based on one race, one language, one culture and one religion” and that the Government “stood for a multiracial, multilingual, multicultural and multireligious Singapore”. This perennial issue of whether SAP schools were cut off from other races saw more publicity as media comments from the minority communities argued against the operation of these schools on the ground that such schools were “racial cocoons”.<sup>79</sup> A survey conducted by *The Straits Times* in February 2002 also concluded that SAP school students had “fewer friends of other races, compared to students in non-SAP schools”.

Further cultural initiatives that followed the ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign and the introduction of the SAP schools, such as religious education in schools, the search for ‘Asian Values’ by extolling the virtues of Confucianism, the building of Chinese theme parks and the provision of big budgets for Chinese television serials are all seen by the ethnic Malay and Indian communities as veiled attempts to accord undue importance and an increased sense of superiority to the Chinese community and marginalize the minority communities on the strength of the ‘race’ card. They view structural inequalities in the education system and a general social bias towards the Chinese as offering Chinese students an educational advantage over the minority communities and contributing to their disproportionate economic success. These discourses of the state are widely perceived by several respondents as founded on Confucianism and its persistent equation with Asian Values, thus leaving little room for ethnic Malay or Indian discourses. Recently proposals have been suggested to make the learning of Chinese in schools even easier, while giving opportunities to

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<sup>77</sup> *The Straits Times*, 14 June 1990.

<sup>78</sup> *The Straits Times*, 13 March 1999.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 February 2002.



those who want to make Chinese their main language instead of English. Parents are to be given the choice not to force children to try to master two languages to equal ability. The intense uneasiness caused by the furore of the Speak Mandarin Campaign and other state-directed initiatives to enhance Chinese language and culture has not only prompted defensive responses from the Chinese community but also elicited repeated assurances from the political leadership allaying the fears of the minority communities while also reminding the Chinese to be aware of the fragile multiracial fabric of Singapore society.<sup>80</sup> The government also took pains to stress that,

While the majority should be tolerant of and understand the sensibilities of the minority communities, there are times when the minorities must also understand the sensibilities of the majority... For the minorities to ask for the [Speak Mandarin] campaign to be withdrawn could prove troublesome because the Chinese could react in a way which could be harmful to the minority community... tolerance must be mutual... multiracialism must cover both sides.<sup>81</sup>

The Prime Minister further emphasized that the minority races should not try to impose their views on the Chinese and that they should not get upset over issues like the Speak Mandarin Campaign that was targeted only at Chinese Singaporeans.<sup>82</sup>

The nation state furthermore emphasizes meritocracy in the education system. Yet as is the case in nearly all merit-based societies, forms of class disadvantage are reproduced through the schooling system. Former Education Minister Tony Tan, for example, exposed the differences in educational achievement between the ethnic groups in the following words, “Malay and Indian children do not perform as well as Chinese children because they are relatively weaker in English and Mathematics”. To support his statement, he produced statistics that showed striking differences in the rates of educational achievement over the years between these groups in major school examinations, particularly in English and Mathematics. The gap he observed widened as they went up the “education ladder” and that “without success in school

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<sup>80</sup> Lai Ah Eng, *Meanings of Multiethnicity*, 151.

<sup>81</sup> *The Straits Times*, 17 July 1991.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 July 1991.

examinations, one cannot hope to aspire to higher levels of vocations or job opportunities in a modern industrialized city like Singapore”.<sup>83</sup>

This meant that the children of the wealthy Chinese and the English-educated succeeded in attaining top positions in commerce and employment (see Tables 18-22 in Chapter 8.2). This is because such children mainly came from affluent Chinese families who could afford to give their children the best educational opportunities. In contrast, the lower classes and minority ‘races’ were considered by the state to lack ability, Lee Kuan Yew often referring to them as ‘digits’, a reference which had its genesis in Lee’s eugenics theories whereby intelligence is linked to ‘race’ and biological heredity (see Chapter 6.2).<sup>84</sup> It was, according to Lee, the children of the elite on whom

we aim to identify the most intelligent members of society who can provide the direction, planning and control of [state] power in the people’s interest... It is on this group that we must expend our limited and slender resources in order that they will provide the yeast, that ferment, that catalyst in our society which alone will ensure that Singapore shall maintain... the social organization which enables us, with almost no natural resources, to provide the second highest standard of living in Asia... We do this by means of an educational system in which Singapore’s brightest students [are] groomed for future command... The ideal product is the student, the university graduate, who is strong, robust, rugged, with tremendous qualities of stamina, endurance and at the same time with great intellectual discipline and most important of all, humility and love of community.<sup>85</sup>

In his last National Day speech as Prime Minister in 1990 before stepping down, Lee said that only the top 3% of Singapore was capable of political leadership, indirectly referring to the Chinese elite.<sup>86</sup> Critiquing the supposed link between intelligence and examinations, 48-year old Kripalini, a dermatologist in private practice explains:

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<sup>83</sup> Speech by former Education Minister Tony Tan on 15 November 1990 and reported in *The Straits Times* on 16 November 1990.

<sup>84</sup> George, *Lee Kuan Yew’s Singapore*, 132.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, 100-102.

<sup>86</sup> *The Straits Times*, 1 September 1990.

Your intelligence in Singapore is determined by genetics. Whether you are genetically competent is decided by school examinations. If you fail the exams you are genetically inferior and there is no hope for you. Why, Bill Gates would be a dishwasher in Singapore!

In expressing this view, he says that the government often used academic performances of the various ethnic groups to reinforce perceptions of the intelligence hierarchy of these groups, Chinese always being considered the most intelligent when compared with Indians and Malays. “Singapore may be the only country in the world that is openly following the discredited ideology of eugenics”, he concludes. Yet it could be convincingly argued that meritocracy in education is an issue of class more than race. Meritocracy, by its very nature, finds it difficult to distinguish between the child of a menial worker and the child of a doctor because both are capable of excelling in their studies. The only reason that the doctor’s child fares better is because the doctor-parent is able to give their child that extra push – by means of their own time, education and resources – which the labourer can ill-afford. The difference, it could be argued, is not because of ‘race’. Thus instead of perceiving the minority community as backward because of their ‘race’, it stands to reason that class is the overriding factor in meritocracy, though the Singapore nation state favours the Chinese against the minority communities on the strength of ‘race.’

Thus the educational system in Singapore targets educational resources based on a ‘racial’ categorization of people by linking them to class and education. For instance, the Graduate Mother Scheme linking education to reproduction patterns (described in Chapter 6.3) and the Gifted Education programme all aimed at reproducing the Chinese capitalist class while the less academically inclined (coming mainly from the Malay and Indian communities) were diverted to technical and vocational training to boost the lower rungs of the labour force. Likewise the state’s emphasis on higher educational qualifications under the ideology of meritocracy dictated that foreign middle-class and affluent Chinese professionals and business people were, besides whites, accorded preferential treatment in being given employment passes to work in Singapore with a whole range of incentives for them to stay on in Singapore with their families, while work permits with severe restrictions were issued to less-educated working class production workers, construction labourers and domestic servants from Malaysia, Thailand, India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Philippines and Sri Lanka (see Chapter 4.4). The consequence of the principle of

meritocratic sorting is seen in the many surveys that show that income inequality actually widened between ethnic minorities and the Chinese in the economic sector, the latter having higher educational qualifications and occupying top positions in business and employment.<sup>87</sup>

As I have demonstrated above, several of my interviewees have reported that language and educational policies have served to unite the majority community more closely around the idea of 'race'. Apt are the words of respondent Pillay, a 54-year lawyer in private practice, who wonders about what is ahead for Singapore's minorities,

Government's policies seem destined to project an ever-increasing Chinese monopoly and Chinese dominance in every aspect of our daily life and activities based on their preoccupation with race, with a concomitant reduction in Chinese commitment to multiracialism. Minorities like mine will just have to tolerate and accept the system, otherwise there will be trouble, but the government must also empathise with our situation.

Minority anxieties resulted in Chinese chauvinism based on 'race' taking centre-stage during the public debate over the issue of whether MRT signs should be in English or Chinese, or both, or in all the four official languages. Some of the Chinese-educated argued that as they formed the major 'race', the signs should be only in Chinese. Such exchanges illustrate the fact that beneath the surface of multiracial peace lie ethnic and linguistic passions that feed on the 'race' card. 'Race' and language also became a hot issue during the General Elections of 1997 resulting in minority groups (as well as Chinese-educated Singaporeans) urging the state to reassure the public that all 'races' and language groups would be treated fairly. Recognizing that 'race' and language, among other issues, remained sensitive and will remain so in Singapore, the Government advised them that there would be an "open, level playing field for all races", with English as the dominant working language.<sup>88</sup> The state, while encouraging Chinese culture, language and traditions, frequently makes pronouncements to assure the minorities that "efforts would be made to help

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<sup>87</sup> See Walden Bello and Stephanie Rosenfeld, *Dragons in Distress: Asia's Miracle Economies in Crisis* (San Francisco: Food First, 1990), 331; Janet W Salaff, *State and Family in Singapore* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988); William Keng Mun Lee, "The Income Marginality of Ethnic Minorities: An Analysis of Ethnic Income Inequality in Singapore," *Asian Ethnicity* 5,1 (February 2004).

<sup>88</sup> PM Goh Chok Tong as reported in *The Straits Times* of 23 January 1997 and 26 January 1997.

all ethnic groups strengthen their own cultural and social fabric, while also binding them into one Singaporean identity”.<sup>89</sup>

#### **7.4 Conclusion**

The housing and language/education policies discussed in this chapter demonstrate the strong responses ethnic Singapore Indians exhibit as they feel the direct impact of these policies in their daily lives. Though most Indians accept multiethnic living as part of the social reality of multiracial Singapore, they take umbrage with what they perceive to be excessive state intervention and control biased in favour of the majority Chinese in the enforcement of the ethnic quota, language and educational policies. Their responses suggest that the quota policy does not augur well for the promotion of national identity because it is categorized according to ‘race’. Likewise language/education policies draw sharp reactions from Indians who perceive that such policies are based on the ‘race’ factor that enables Chinese to assert their ethnic superiority over the minority communities thereby undermining the policy of multiracialism, meritocracy and the concomitant objective of national identity espoused by the state. In the final chapter I will examine how the Indian community is again faced with the dilemma of ethnic identity clashing with national identity in the social engineering policies of self-help and heritage conservation.

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<sup>89</sup> Goh Chok Tong as reported in *The Straits Times*, 6 February 1997.

## CHAPTER 8

### RACIAL POLITICS AND SOCIAL ENGINEERING – SELF-HELP AND HERITAGE CONSERVATION

#### 8.1 Introduction

While chapters 6 and 7 have sought to demonstrate that the minority Indian (and Malay) communities saw many aspects of the state's social engineering policies as divisive and not contributing to national integration, Chapter 8 further explores their fears, anxieties and tensions with regard to the government's policies of self-help and heritage conservation. The state has gone about engaging and negotiating these policies with the various communities, but the Indian minority is particularly concerned that such policies highlight ethnic differences and ethnic inequalities to the detriment of national identity.<sup>1</sup> Their feelings and concerns find a voice in this chapter.

#### 8.2 'Race' and Self-help

The commitment to the principle of meritocracy hitherto discussed with respect to the language and education policy of the state applies equally to other aspects of state planning. In particular it applies to the problem of economic inequalities between the Chinese and the minority 'races'. Robust economic growth and the growing affluence of the middle class during the decades following independence resulted in growing socio-economic disparities between the Chinese and the minority communities. Tables 18-22 below show economic performance between the various ethnic groups and the widening gap between the Chinese and the Malays/Indians. These tables show that the majority of Malays and Indians – especially the Malays – hold low-skilled jobs producing low incomes while having large families unlike the Chinese.

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<sup>1</sup> The Malays are equally concerned in the context of their community, but their anxieties and tensions are sidestepped for the purposes of this thesis, although there is some discussion of their position in this chapter.

Table 18

Monthly income from work and ethnic group 1980, 1990 and 2000 (percent)

2000					
Monthly income from work (\$)	Total	Chinese	Malays	Indians	Others
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Below 500	3.5	3.5	4.1	3.4	2.3
500-999	8.2	7.9	10.6	8.6	4.8
1,000-1,499	14.9	13.9	21.5	16.1	11.7
1,500-1,999	15.5	14.6	22.0	16.1	10.7
2,000-2,999	23.6	23.4	26.3	22.7	18.6
3,000 & over	34.3	36.7	15.5	33.1	51.9
1990					
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Below 500	11.0	6.9	9.4	17.6	57.4
500-999	37.1	36.8	47.8	38.9	16.1
1,000-1,499	23.4	24.5	27.0	21.7	4.5
1,500-1,999	11.3	12.4	9.4	9.5	3.0
2,000-2,999	8.9	10.2	4.6	6.8	4.4
3,000 & over	8.3	9.2	1.8	5.5	14.6
Average \$	1,414	1,497	1,049	1,195	1,408
1980					
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Below 500	63.4	60.2	81.7	68.7	31.9
500-999	24.2	26.6	15.7	20.2	12.7
1,000-1,499	5.9	6.7	1.8	4.8	7.4
1,500-1,999	2.5	2.9	0.5	2.1	5.8
2,000-2,999	2.0	2.1	0.2	2.3	9.9
3,000 & over	2.0	1.5	0.1	1.9	32.3
Average \$	598	595	388	568	2,307

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

Table 19

## Occupational distribution by ethnic group (percent)

Occupation	Chinese			Malays			Indians			Others		
	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Administrative & Managerial	5.1	11.0	15.9	0.6	1.1	2.9	3.7	7.1	12.5	24.5	13.2	27.0
Professional, Technical & Related	9.1	18.7	30.3	4.8	10.6	20.4	8.9	15.1	30.7	25.9	27.5	36.4
Clerical	16.2	14.8	13.5	14.5	16.0	20.0	13.9	15.0	15.4	10.5	18.2	12.5
Sales & Services	16.1	14.0	11.7	6.0	15.4	16.2	13.8	17.1	13.7	4.7	15.9	12.2
Production & Related	38.7	26.5	18.6	54.2	37.7	27.5	36.0	24.1	15.4	20.3	12.8	6.7
Cleaners & Labourers	8.6	9.7	6.2	17.3	16.2	10.7	16.2	15.2	8.0	9.4	6.5	3.0
Others	6.2	5.3	3.8	2.6	3.0	2.3	7.5	6.4	4.3	4.7	5.9	2.2

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore

Table 20

## Economic performance by average monthly household income

	1980	1990	2000
Chinese	1,213	3,213	5,219
Malays	896	2,246	3,148
Indians	1,133	2,859	4,556

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.



Table 21  
Highest qualification attained by ethnic group<sup>2</sup>

Highest qualification Attained	Chinese		Malays		Indians		Others	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No Qualification	32.0	20.2	30.5	20.0	27.7	13.9	15.5	7.5
Primary	25.6	21.9	33.1	30.1	31.4	24.5	26.5	16.2
Secondary	25.7	23.2	30.0	32.1	27.8	26.4	33.9	25.2
Upper Secondary	7.6	15.0	4.9	12.9	7.7	15.6	12.2	19.9
Polytechnic	4.1	7.0	0.9	2.9	1.2	3.1	2.2	3.8
University	5.1	12.6	0.6	2.0	4.1	16.5	9.6	27.5

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

<sup>2</sup> In 2000, the Indians had the highest proportion of university graduates – 17 percent compared with 13 percent for the Chinese and 2 percent for the Malays. The Indians also had the largest increase in proportion of university graduates between 1990 and 2000 compared with the Chinese and Malays. The jump in the proportion of Indian university graduates was partly due to the entry of Indian permanent residents possessing university qualifications in the last decade. Among the Indian permanent residents, 51 percent were university graduates in 2000, up from a mere 9.0 percent in 1990. In contrast, the increase was smaller among the Chinese and Malay permanent residents.

Table 22  
University graduates by major field of study and ethnic group, 1990 and 2000<sup>3</sup>

Major field of study	Total		Chinese		Malays		Indians		Others	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Arts & Social Sciences	25.0	17.9	23.2	16.6	55.0	34.4	35.5	21.6	38.5	30.2
Mgt, Acct & Commerce	24.4	30.8	25.7	32.5	11.9	22.0	13.3	21.9	17.6	21.1
Law	3.7	2.6	3.1	2.3	6.0	2.8	11.0	4.5	6.1	3.4
Stats & Computer Studies	4.7	7.7	5.0	8.0	2.0	6.8	2.3	6.7	1.9	5.5
Natural & Physical Sciences	10.7	7.1	10.7	6.7	7.6	7.2	12.8	10.4	6.6	6.8
Medical, Dental & Related Sciences	6.1	4.4	6.0	4.3	2.4	4.9	8.2	4.5	6.6	4.9
Engineering	20.2	22.8	21.1	22.9	9.1	14.6	13.6	24.1	15.2	20.0
Architecture, Building Science & Related Fields	3.6	2.9	3.8	3.1	3.5	2.7	1.1	1.2	3.4	2.9
Other Fields	1.6	3.8	1.4	3.6	2.5	4.6	2.2	5.1	4.1	5.2

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore.

The above statistics have been reinforced by data from several other sources. For example, according to a 2000 report prepared by the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) on Malay successes and shortcomings in the ten previous years, the Malay-Chinese-Indian income gap widened between 1990 and 1995, with the Malays lagging behind the other ethnic groups on both income and education fronts, and, as a result, unable to make a national impact in comparison with the others. For example, the report comments, the percentage of Malay workers earning more than

<sup>3</sup> In terms of major field of study, the growth in the number of persons with university qualifications was centered on engineering and computer studies. These disciplines are concentrated mainly among the Chinese and spurred on by the strong demand for computer and engineering professionals from the rapidly expanding computer, electronics and more technologically-based manufacturing industries.

\$2,000 per month rose from 6.4% to 22.4%. But the percentage of Chinese and Indian workers in the same income group jumped from 19.4% to 42.8% and from 12.3% to 35.7% respectively. In education, the report notes that the percentage of Malay students going on to post-secondary institutions leapt from 35.9% in 1990 to 76.7% in 1999, but many Malays, it says, are still weak in mathematics and science and do not make it to pre-university centres, polytechnics and institutes of technical education. The AMP report also commented that only about 20% of Malays from Primary 1 had at least 5 O-level passes in 1996 compared to over 60% of Chinese students from the same batch. The community also had a high number of unskilled workers who are not able to fill jobs in the nation's new knowledge and technology-driven economy, the report added.<sup>4</sup> Table 22 shows that those who do make it to tertiary institutions end up doing the 'soft' disciplines like Arts and Social Sciences, unlike the Chinese (and to a lesser extent Indians) who excel in the sciences, engineering and computer studies.

The question therefore arises whether these trends – that is, Chinese economic domination, Malays having large families, low-paying jobs and low incomes, and Indians also having low-paying jobs with low incomes – are related. It has been shown that historical race-based discrimination at the workplace is a common concern voiced by the ethnic minorities. Several of my Indian respondents appear aggrieved at the way they are treated in the workplace as well as in Chinese shops and other Chinese establishments. "We are treated as inferiors", says Poongothai, an accounts clerk in a private company employing many Chinese. In a similar way, Muthu a 37-year old salesman in an automobile company says, "I don't see myself going up in promotions even though I've performed well. Preference goes to my Chinese colleagues". Another Indian, 39-year old Lingam working in a government department agrees. All in all my respondents are unanimous in claiming that they perceive a sort of "internalized orientalism" on the part of their Chinese peers or superiors, because of a combination of perceptions of cultural superiority by the Chinese race and negative stereotypes of other ethnic groups. Such an attitude also permeates business dealings that Indians have with Chinese. "My thirty years of dealing with Chinese shows that sometimes they try to short-change me in various ways. They try to take advantage of me because I belong to a minority race", is the

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<sup>4</sup> Reported in *The Straits Times* of 21 October 2000.

reply from Ranjit Singh, a 58-year old textile wholesaler. Minority communities therefore perceive the state as reinforcing barriers of 'race' and class even in the workplace and as wanting to maintain Chinese racial, cultural, economic and political dominance in Singapore by a hegemonically and carefully orchestrated process of social engineering focused on advantaging the economic superiority of ethnic Chinese.

Research by William Keng on ethnic income inequality in Singapore highlights his conclusion that more than educational differences between the various communities, the segregation of ethnic minorities in lower-paying jobs and occupations across all industries reflect Chinese domination in the economic and political spheres (see Tables 18 and 19).<sup>5</sup> Similar concerns have been raised by other researchers on this under-researched topic of ethnic inequality issues in Singapore.<sup>6</sup> Although related to British colonial policy arising from historical migration patterns, this situation appears to have become entrenched in the economic policies of the postcolonial state thus perpetuating the separate cultural and economic identities of the main ethnic groups. According to Keng's study, occupational distribution between these ethnic groups also shows a pattern similar to that which existed in the colonial period. The Chinese are well represented in the high-paying financial services and business activities compared to the Malays and Indians who are, with exceptions, disproportionately confined to the lower-paying unskilled and semi-skilled sectors of the economy (see Tables 18 and 19). The concentration of ethnic minorities in lower-paying occupations and industries was, the study concludes, because of institutional discrimination arising from ethnicity. The study also points out that, despite the overall economic improvement of the three main ethnic groups during the last two decades, ethnic income inequalities had actually widened.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> William Keng Mun Lee, "The Income Marginality of Ethnic Minorities: An Analysis of Ethnic Income Inequality in Singapore," *Asian Ethnicity* 5, 1 (Feb 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Lily Zubaidah Rahim Ishak, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1998); J B Tamney, *The Struggle over Singapore's Soul: Western Modernization and Asian Culture* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 98-103; John Clammer, *Singapore: Ideology, Society, Culture* (Singapore: Chopmen, 1985) 118-129; Tania Li, *Malays in Singapore: Culture, Economy and Ideology* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989) 99-121; Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore* (London and New York: St Martin's Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> The latest General Household Survey conducted by the Department of Statistics and released on 28 June 2006 also confirms that although average monthly household incomes rose between 2000 and

Tracing back the reasons for this state of affairs, one could argue that with the ‘racial’ division of labour since colonial days, the Chinese have dominated the economy and, after the British left, obtained a ‘stranglehold’ on the economy by erecting cultural barriers based on prevailing negative social and physical stereotypes to exclude Malays and Indians from higher-paying occupations in Singapore.<sup>8</sup> In addition, since independence and the rebuilding of Singapore after separation from Malaysia, the state has relied primarily on the Chinese for support. They have been perceived as the bulwark of independent Singapore. State economic policies that accentuate ethnic differences have been perceived by ethnic minorities to magnify the economic dominance of the country’s Chinese majority despite affirmative action policies for these communities. In addition, as I have discussed in Chapter 4, migration policies of the state have been tied to labour policies based on ‘race’ and the multicultural policies of the state resulting from globalization.

While the Chinese forge ahead both in academic performance and material success, the Indians and particularly the Malays perceive that they are being increasingly excluded from the middle class. There is the persistent belief among these two groups that the state is moving away from its declared principle of multiracial and multicultural equality of all ‘races’ by according disproportionate importance to the Chinese at the expense of the minority communities. In an interview that Raj Vasil had with an important Malay leader of the governing PAP in December 1988, the leader summarises the unhappiness of the Malay community in the following words:

To many Malays, the PAP government seems to be more interested in appeasing the Chinese in order to maintain their large electoral support than strictly upholding the principle of multiracialism that in 1965 had guaranteed an equality of rights and status to all the different communities.<sup>9</sup>

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2005 across all ethnic groups, the income gap was widening. Reported in *The Straits Times* of 29 June 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Barr, “Lee Kuan Yew: Race, Culture and Genes,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29, 2 (1999); P Erik, “Prospect of Liberalization in Singapore,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 23, 3 (1993); Kuah Khun Eng, “Confucian Ideology and Social Engineering in Singapore,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 20, 3 (1990).

<sup>9</sup> Raj Vasil, *Governing Singapore: Democracy and National Development* (St Leonards, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2000).

Social engineering measures of the late 1970s and 1980s like the promotion of Confucian values, the building of Chinese theme parks, the recruitment of Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong, the repeated calls for Chinese to produce more babies, the naming of roads, buildings and new townships in Chinese and general Chinese domination in Singapore, along with the policy of preventing ethnic concentrations (meaning Malay and Indian) in public housing estates had only served to create increasing resentment among the Malays and to a lesser extent Indians. Simultaneously they too began to assert their own identities as evidenced by appeals from minority leaders to the state's leaders. On their part, the Chinese had, since the late 1970s, also been unhappy despite their dominant position because they saw the emphasis on English and increasing adoption of Western lifestyles as a threat to their cultural values and identity.<sup>10</sup>

The problem of racial disparity was therefore causing concern to the state that felt that if left unattended it would result in serious disharmony and unrest between the communities and consequently undermine political stability, economic growth and national identity. The problem was most acute with the Malays who, according to numerous documented sources, were already feeling marginalized, discriminated against, and cut off from mainstream society not only because of their own anti-Chinese sentiment but also because of racial slurs and prejudices held against them by the Chinese on account of their 'race' – the Malay 'problem' has been well documented by several historians and writers on Singapore.<sup>11</sup> Racial slurs against Malays were also compounded in the educational system by the way in which the Education Ministry analysed examination results by 'race' and showed how the Chinese outperformed other ethnic groups, particularly the Malays (see Tables 21 & 22). The difference in performance was caused, according to the Education Minister, by "socio-economic factors, the importance placed on education by parents of various 'races', the different make-ups and attitudes of the various racial groups".<sup>12</sup> Lee Kuan Yew himself attributes Malay students' underachievement to lack of parental

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<sup>10</sup> The unhappiness of the Chinese has been reflected in several letters to the Readers' Forum page of *The Straits Times* and in appeals by Chinese organisations to the political leadership.

<sup>11</sup> Chinese negative perceptions of Malays have been discussed in previous chapters, especially Chapter 1.

<sup>12</sup> *The Straits Times*, 17 November 1990.

discipline.<sup>13</sup> Malay government leaders also repeatedly contrast the Malays with the ‘business culture’ inherent among the Chinese ‘psyche’ by reminding them that to be successful they must emulate the Chinese.<sup>14</sup> All these perceptions of a cultural hierarchy by state leaders tend to justify “the myth of the lazy native” and thus reinforce ‘racial’ identities and ‘racial’ thinking – a prejudice that partly owes its origins to colonial attitudes and partly to Lee’s theory of the economic and cultural superiority of the Chinese resulting from their supposedly superior genes (see Chapter 6.2).<sup>15</sup>

Under the British, the Malays had enjoyed special rights, a historical creation based on British colonial policy that provided Malays with certain privileges on “the assumption that they alone were indigenous...and needed both political and economic protection.”<sup>16</sup> Although the constitution of the new nation state enshrined the principle of “equal citizenship rights for people of all races”<sup>17</sup> in line with its ideology of multiracialism, there was some recognition of the disadvantaged position of the Malays<sup>18</sup> as they were “historically marginal to Singapore’s political, economic and social life”<sup>19</sup>, the state being concerned that “harm will be done to the unity and integrity of the nation if one section (of the population) is lagging behind”.<sup>20</sup> This issue of special rights became another factor in the Malays’ sense of alienation as they perceived that the Chinese were being favoured in various aspects of everyday life in Singapore. For instance, Malay sensitivities were compounded by their exclusion

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<sup>13</sup> *The Straits Times*, 25 August 1990, 13 October 1990.

<sup>14</sup> See Joseph Tamney, *The Struggle over Singapore’s Soul*, 99.

<sup>15</sup> James Minchin, *No Man is an Island* (1986; reprint, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> Gordon P Means, *Malaysian Politics* (London: University of London Press, 1970), 177.

<sup>17</sup> Pang Cheng Lian, *Singapore’s People’s Action Party: It’s History, Leadership, and Organization* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1971), 2.

<sup>18</sup> The constitutional guarantee provided that the government shall “protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote (Malay) political, educational, religious, economic, social, and cultural interests and the Malay language,” but did not extend the guarantee to public or private employment or in admission to institutes of higher learning – Ahmad Mattar, “The Singapore Malays: Their Education and Role in National Development” in *People’s Action Party 1954-1979* (Singapore: Central Executive Committee, People’s Action Party, 1979), 82.

<sup>19</sup> Russell Betts, *Multiracialism, Meritocracy, and the Malays in Singapore*, Ph.D. diss., (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1975), 34.

<sup>20</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, cited in Alex Josey, *Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Donald Moore Press, Ltd., 1968), 308.

from sensitive positions in the armed forces of Singapore because of historical perceptions by the state that they owed their loyalties more to Malaysia than to Singapore. Government leaders have themselves voiced their concerns in this matter, as in former Prime Minister Lee's speech in 1999 that background checks would be carried out on Malay Singapore Armed Forces officers who had family ties in Malaysia, before they were put in command of machine-gun units.<sup>21</sup>

The position of the Malays has therefore always been a source of worry for the state after the political separation from Muslim Malaysia, the race riots that occurred in the 1960s and its unhappiness as reflected in the poor support by the Malays for the PAP in successive elections. It was not until the late 1970s that the PAP leadership under Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong realized that concerted and positive action had to be taken to improve the position of the Malays to ensure political and social stability in the nation state (and their support for the party). It therefore decided that commitment to the principle of meritocracy by an attitudinal change on the part of the Malay community was necessary. Secondly, the state decided that the community needed to help itself to improve the educational performance and technical skills of its disadvantaged members and expected that this would contribute to their socio-economic improvement. MENDAKI (the Council on Education for Malay/Muslim children) was therefore first set up in 1981 under Government sponsorship as a response by the Malay-Muslim PAP Members of Parliament to the worsening educational standards of the Malays, especially in English, Mathematics and Science, as evidenced in the 1980 census. Malay leaders themselves agreed that just about everything – from their philosophy of life to the home environment – worked against the community and gave the other communities in Singapore an edge over them. Several Malay school principals interviewed admitted that a host of inhibiting factors deterred their Malay students from competing with their Chinese and Indian friends in school.<sup>22</sup> Problems like the low educational background of Malay parents, lack of suitable reading materials at home, emphasis by Malays on religion and the spoken Malay language, as well as lack of aspiration for progress all supposedly combined to produce a philosophy of life that contented Malays. Hence their poor grasp of English that in turn was responsible for poor performances in mathematics and

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<sup>21</sup> Reported in *The Straits Times* of 12 October 1999.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 May 1982.



science. In the words of Ahmad Mattar, then Acting Minister of Community Affairs and Chairman of MENDAKI, the objective of MENDAKI was to “improve the level of educational achievement by Malay/Muslim students, and to increase the number and percentage of higher-educated Malays/Muslims.”<sup>23</sup> Said Prime Minister Lee, when opening the MENDAKI Congress on Education on 28 May 1982:

The problem is of concern to all Singaporeans and not just to Malay Singaporeans. It is in the interests of all to have Malay Singaporeans better educated and better qualified and to increase their contribution to Singapore’s development.

In alluding to their poor educational performances, Lee once again referred to his eugenics philosophy pointing out two factors – nature being the natural intelligence of the child, and nurture being the training in education. Talking about the attitudes of parents he made reference to the importance performance in examinations had on Chinese culture. The Indians too, he said, were keenly aware of the importance of studies and examinations as the road to success.<sup>24</sup>

Thus began the idea of self-help groups, initially for the Malay community and, following its success, for the Eurasian, Indian and Chinese ethnic groups as well – it could be argued that this need for mutual support mechanisms by ethnic groups has been a carry-over from Raffles’ strategy of ethnic segregation. Before introducing this form of ethnic-based welfare the state spelt out its position and rationale on social security and self-help, the main philosophy behind this system being that members of an ethnic group best know the problems their group is facing and how to solve these problems most effectively. Wong Kan Seng, Foreign Minister, for example, says that one reason for the state setting up racial self-help groups was that ethnic diversity had to be accepted and managed by Singaporeans themselves so that it became a source of strength for the country<sup>25</sup> – what Brown, referring to the various self-help groups, calls a ‘corporatist’ management of ethnicity.<sup>26</sup> Replying to concerns from Singaporeans that community-based

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<sup>23</sup> Speech by Ahmad Mattar at the opening of the Congress of MENDAKI on 28 May 1982.

<sup>24</sup> Reported in *The Straits Times* of 29 May 1982.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 15 August 1998.

programmes would divide society along ethnic lines, the state countered this argument by saying that it would administer any programme in a 'race-neutral' manner. Hence the "various ethnic groups would have to help members of their community who fell behind as the Government could not help one group at the expense of the others", says S Chandra Das, Member of Parliament in a message addressed to the Indian community.<sup>27</sup> In using the 'race'-based approach to solve social problems of the various ethnic communities, the Prime Minister then warned community leaders that two operating principles should always be observed and upheld. Firstly, they must reaffirm their commitment to multiracialism, and secondly they should not use "ethnic or religious appeal to boost one community at the expense of another, or to play off one group against another, in promoting each community's programme".<sup>28</sup> Responding to renewed public calls that community self-help groups would be potentially divisive and that one national body to help the underclass from the various communities would be the solution, the state addressed these concerns by saying that if there was one national body the Chinese as the strongest group would dominate by "being most influential in making decisions affecting all races, being the most powerful in fund-raising, and having first claim on resources".<sup>29</sup>

In analysing the need for self-help groups, the state also reiterated the importance of the family in Singaporean culture, stressing that the family should show care and compassion for its own members. "Singaporeans are materialistic but they are committed first and foremost to the material well-being of family members, and there are good reasons for that. Most of us are the descendants of economic migrants from China".<sup>30</sup> These were the words of Lee Kuan Yew, drawing on biological essentialism once again. The state stressed the importance of the community looking after the interests of its members. Its stand on this issue is echoed in the following press editorial:

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<sup>26</sup> David Brown, "The Politics of Reconstructing National Identity: A Corporatist Approach," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 32, 2 (1997), 255-269.

<sup>27</sup> Reported in *The Straits Times* of 6 November 1991.

<sup>28</sup> Address by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong to the Sikh community at the Central Sikh Temple on 21 November 1991.

<sup>29</sup> *The Straits Times*, 22 November 1992.

<sup>30</sup> "A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1994, 115.

Until such a time when history has made Singapore a nation of one people, no amount of rational analysis can defeat the biological instinct to care, when pressed to prioritise, for one's own [ethnic] community first".<sup>31</sup>

In perceiving the need for a 'levelling up' policy, Lee warned:

If we are to remain a socially mobile society, with no class distinctions or class hatreds, those who have risen up through meritocracy must take an active interest in the welfare and well-being of the less fortunate. Not to do so is to risk a gradual stratification of Singapore society. Then, the less successful will begin to resent those who are successful but do not bother about them.<sup>32</sup>

Saying that "we are all prisoners of our instincts" and that "the first instinct is to identify with somebody who looks like him", Lee's dictum is echoed by the newspaper's editorial on 1 September 1992 as follows: "Put simply, one's charity extends from the family to the social grouping and then to society at large in a prioritized fashion".<sup>33</sup> In other words, these quotes can be interpreted to refer to peoples' supposed primary identification with their own 'race'. Hence the justification for separate self-help organizations for the Chinese, Malays, Indians and Eurasians, typifying state policies that harmonized with official 'racial' categories.

Consequently, with the encouragement of the state, MENDAKI was set up and the state agreed to provide administrative and financial support for the Malay cause. MENDAKI programmes offer educational tuition to students to improve their performance. Other programmes offer counseling to help Malays deal with drug problems, the high divorce rate and economic progress. A donation of \$1 per month is deducted from the wages of Malay/Muslim workers while the state matches it with an amount equal to the total of the community donations. The successful experience of MENDAKI inevitably led to pressure from the other ethnic groups, even from the Chinese, for similar help. For instance, a reader of *The Straits Times* E H Ong, in a letter to the newspaper published on 2 July 1988, expressed his misgivings of aid being extended to only one ethnic group. He mentioned the need to avoid "aggravating one race" and "hurting the others". Such appeals enabled the state to encourage similar community and ethnic based self-help organizations for the

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<sup>31</sup> *The Straits Times*, 23 September 1992.

<sup>32</sup> Speech before the General Elections of August 1991.

<sup>33</sup> *The Straits Times* of 21 August 1989.

Eurasian, Indian and Chinese communities to address their cultural, educational and social deficiencies, the state thereby hegemonically shifting responsibility for the upliftment of each ethnic group to the groups themselves. In 1989 the Eurasian Association was formed and in 1991 the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA) was set up by the state at the urging of the Indian community. In the following year the Chinese community set up the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC) on a platform similar to that of MENDAKI. The CDAC was formed for the purpose of helping “poorer Chinese escape the underachievement trap through self-help programmes such as extra classes and worker training”.<sup>34</sup> Each community launched a slew of programmes to improve poor school grades, provide worker training and help strengthen family and ethnic ties.

As previous chapters have shown, the British had left the various ethnic groups to their own resources. Community and clan associations had therefore provided opportunities for social interaction, found jobs and resolved conflicts for its members. The nation state, it can be argued, has similarly distanced itself from the role of providing social security and support on the grounds that humans need moral support from members of their own community. Says Goh Chok Tong addressing the Indian community at a SINDA function: “The reality is that many Singaporeans remain more comfortable turning to members of their own community for help. They feel less inhibited sharing their problems with someone from the same community, culture and religion”.<sup>35</sup> Though the state saw a communitarian welfare strategy as helping to bind the nation through mutual self-help, the media subsequently reported that the Prime Minister’s comments at the SINDA function had “stirred Singaporeans to think about race again”.<sup>36</sup> One of its readers, V Sivaprasad, an Indian, has confessed to a ‘nagging fear’ that ‘race’-based self-help groups went against the logic of a multiracial reality espoused by the nation state’s founders. Another reader argued that such self-help groups did not help in integration as they only served to emphasise “racial distinctiveness” and “highlight and perpetuate differences”.<sup>37</sup> There was yet another view that self-help groups caused the emergence of a ‘racial’ consciousness

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<sup>34</sup> *The Straits Times Weekly Edition*, 29 May 1993.

<sup>35</sup> Speech at SINDA on 25 February 2001 and reported in *The Straits Times* of 26 February 01.

<sup>36</sup> *The Straits Times*, 28 February 01.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

“better off left behind”, but another school of thought posited that this was a “good thing” as it enabled ‘race’ issues to be aired in the open, though discussions about ‘race’ were still frowned upon in ‘race’-sensitive Singapore. The irony of self-help groups is that in the postcolonial nation the well-off Chinese are able to command more robust financial resources than others by virtue of their overwhelming demographic majority and with greater active support from the state are able to utilise opportunities to widen the already existing economic disparities with the Malay and Indian communities and hence worsen the problem of ‘racial’ and class cleavages.<sup>38</sup>

Minority groups insist that state policies that create and manage ethnicity politicize ethnic differences and inequalities. As in the other social engineering instruments discussed so far, ‘race’ has been used as a primary social identification in community-based self-help policies and this has led to the perception among the minority ethnic groups that identifying and targeting them to improve their socio-economic position promotes the notion that the Chinese are a class apart and superior to them, a notion that strengthens and reinforces Chinese dominance and negative racist attitudes towards minority groups. My interviews reveal that many Indians do not share the state’s ‘race’-based approach in helping the communities uplift themselves. Jayakumar, an Indian lawyer in private practice says:

When MENDAKI was set up, it was done with the best of intentions. However, it has led quickly to a clear division of Singaporeans into three distinct racial groups looking selfishly and inwardly into their own ethnic problems, thus heightening their ethnic consciousness and identity. Is the Government not going back on multiracialism and nation building? Why is there so much emphasis now on ethnic identity and race instead of multiracial cohesion?

The Prime Minister responding to public concerns about self-help groups felt, however, that the fear of heightened ‘racial’ consciousness resulting from the formation of the self-help groups was “exaggerated” and that these groups were not divisive, a view not shared by several of my Indian respondents who feel that ethnic

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<sup>38</sup> See for example, Lily Zubaidah Rahim Ishak, “The Paradox of Ethnic-based Self-help Groups,” in *Debating Singapore*, ed. Derek da Cunha (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994).

self-help groups only sharpen the sense of ethnic difference while perpetuating the notion that meaningful help could only come from one's own kind.<sup>39</sup>

Says an informant, 51-year old Indian town planner Narayanan, in summing up the responses of the interviewees:

The irony is that we are preaching racial harmony in a multiracial nation, yet why do the various communities' self-help groups run separate tuition classes on the same subjects? This cannot be good for a multiracial society's well being. Why cannot the five self-help groups offer the classes to all races under one roof in the same way as students of different races learn together in the normal school system? Is the Government sincere in wanting to promote multiracial harmony when the different races are asked to go their separate ways like in colonial days?

In 2001 Abdullah Tarmugi, Minister for Community Development and Sports warned that the leadership of the self-help groups "must avoid turning these organizations into exclusive enclaves catering to only parochial interests".<sup>40</sup> The Prime Minister then called for a "partnership" approach through joint programmes to reduce friction and suspicion among the different races and "to prevent us from swinging unwittingly to an undesirable scenario where more and more social services and programmes are organized along ethnic lines".<sup>41</sup> While efforts have since been made by the self-help groups to offer help to members outside their community, minorities feel that these efforts are merely cosmetic. Even when self-help groups try to offer help to outsiders there is a potential backlash as sometimes people do not accept that members of one 'race' can help those of another. A case in point occurred when two members of an Indian self-help project, Hariprasad Childcare Centre, looked after a 6-year old Chinese girl in a hospital ward where she was recuperating from an operation. A relative of the girl, also Chinese, was befuddled to see that Chinese people had not come to attend to her. Curious visitors asked the Indians, "You mean you also look after Chinese children?" This 'racially'-tinged question, as the reporter of this episode says, is something she comes across often during the

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<sup>39</sup> *The Straits Times*, 11 July 1994.

<sup>40</sup> *The Straits Times*, 19 February 01.

<sup>41</sup> Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong addressing the CDAC at its tenth Anniversary Dinner on 11 May 02 and reported in *The Straits Times* of 12 May 02.

course of her work as a community project worker, leading one to ask, “Is this the impact of ‘race’-based policy changes when Singaporeans are encouraged to go in search of their own roots and look after their own kind? Why the social exclusion?”

Says another respondent, 39-year old Indian housewife Agnes Pakiam with two children receiving mathematics and science tuition from SINDA, “I always take my two children to these classes but never see students from other races there”. Another Indian parent by the name Manivannan at the tuition centre observes, “The Chinese don’t want their children to mix with us. May be they think they are superior”.

In an article examining ethnic differences among the elderly in Singapore, William Lee voices the concern that such a privatization of social security policy is “an attempt at ethnic revitalisation”, a policy which, in his view, is perceived by the minority groups as favouring the Chinese. While, on the one hand, the state expects the minority groups to be self-reliant, on the other hand it is seen as actively supporting Chinese culture through various public campaigns, such as the Speak Mandarin campaign, while other cultures are left to fend for themselves or even undermined, according to Lee. He comes to the conclusion that privatization of social security will only serve to “further disintegrate social cohesion by deepening the divisions among the ethnic groups, and between those who have and those who have not”, a result which “forces individuals to identify with their ethnic groups”. He attributes this state of affairs to the leaders’ “narrow interpretation” that Singapore owed its success to “Chinese cultural influence”, a view which reflects the origin and significance of the state’s racial perspectives.<sup>42</sup>

### **8.3 ‘Race’ and Heritage Conservation**

We should be a nation that is uniquely multiracial and Asian, with each community proud of its traditional culture and heritage.

– former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> William Keng Mun Lee, “Ethnicity and Ageing in Singapore,” *Asian Ethnicity* 2, 2 (September 2001): 176.

<sup>43</sup> Goh Chok Tong, “Our National Ethic” in *Speeches: A Bimonthly Selection of Ministerial Speeches* 12, 5 (Ministry of Communications and Information, Singapore, 1988), 15.

In 1989 Lee Hsien Loong, then Minister for Trade and Industry & Second Minister for Defence (and now Prime Minister), notes that Singaporeans should not “abandon our roots ... They anchor us, and will help us grow”.<sup>44</sup> This ‘search for roots’, as a constitutive part of modernity, has become increasingly manifested in Singapore from the late 1970s as the state realized the need for a renewed emphasis on history to enable Singaporeans to understand nation building. While there were obvious commercial reasons for this trend, beginning with the widespread economic recession in the mid-1980s and the consequent need to showcase Singapore’s multicultural heritage for valuable tourist dollars, there was a greater need to celebrate ethnic heritages by pursuing Asian cultural values, languages and traditions and to remind young Singaporeans that building a sense of history in the face of an ‘onslaught of Western liberal values’ was “the substance of social and psychological defence” for nation building purposes.<sup>45</sup> This sense of history has been manifested in several public policies enforced through massive state intervention and centralized coordination, organized as well through ‘racial’ thinking. Dividing the population along ‘racial’ lines, separate TV and radio programmes cater for the different ethnic groups, and cultural festivals like Chinese New Year for the Chinese, *Hari Raya Puasa* and *Haji* for the Malays and *Deepavali* (festival of lights) for the Indians as well as ethnic dance forms are celebrated separately.

Celebration of the traditions of the multicultural heritage of the ethnic communities has been extended to another significant ‘race’-based policy – that of heritage conservation introduced by the state in the 1980s. Colonial planning often took the form of what Rabinow calls ‘techno-cosmopolitanism’ or the technical formalization of indigenous architectural forms in new building projects that gesture to the colonized as did the French in Morocco, the Dutch in Jakarta and the British in Singapore. The Singapore nation state also realized that heritage conservation was

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<sup>44</sup> Lee Hsien Loong, “The National Identity: A Direction and Identity for Singapore” in *Speeches: A Bimonthly Selection of Ministerial Speeches* 13, 1, (Ministry of Communications and Information, Singapore, 1989), 33.

<sup>45</sup> The economic recession of 1985 meant a sagging economy with fewer tourist arrivals resulting from the growing disappearance of Asian traditional lifestyles, historic buildings and artifacts – the outcome of the state’s fast-paced modernization programme – as well as reduced retail activity and hotel occupancy rates; George Yeo, “Importance of Heritage and Identity” in *Speeches: A Bimonthly Selection of Ministerial Speeches* 13, 1 (Ministry of Communications and Information, Singapore, 1989), 48.



important as it provided a sense of “identity, security and continuity”. It was worried that globalization and relentless economic development in the country could erode traditions and culture and erase the legacies of the past.<sup>46</sup> The Urban Renewal Authority’s (URA) conservation concept manuals acknowledge the significance of preserving heritage in the following words:

In handling historic fabric, it is absolutely essential that mistakes are avoided because once destroyed, our fragile architectural heritage is as good as lost, never to be recovered again. A conscientiously conserved environment can and must be achieved if we are to be able to attract visitors, expand business scope and sophistication and above all, transmit our heritage to the future generations.<sup>47</sup>

This rationale for conservation of ethnic enclaves is the state’s interpretation of the ‘racial’ DNA of Singapore based on the virtues of meritocracy, economic development and competition. This is manifested in the selection of conservation sites by the URA – interestingly it is usually the colonial residential areas in the urban built environment that are earmarked for conservation and preservation, like Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam. So, ‘politically correct’ tourist images of Singapore capture the essence of multiculturalism, ‘racial’ harmony and national identity as propagated by the state by offering a view of Asian traditions set against a backdrop of a modernizing Singapore. In other words, ethnicity is offered as a tourist attraction – what Joel Kahn calls ‘culturalization’ - whereby ethnic groups are seen to live happily together in the nation while preserving their separate cultural identities and practices.<sup>48</sup> This is the official version of a Singaporean identity founded on ‘racial’ harmony, ethnicity being ‘commodified’ by the state and packaged to the outside world and to its own subjects through happy images of its ethnic citizens. Such images are in line with the state’s obsessive ‘programme of image management’ in the words of Laurence Leong, although as I will demonstrate in this chapter, my

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<sup>46</sup> C Erder, *Our Architectural Heritage: From Consciousness to Conservation* (UNESCO, Paris, 1986); Kuah Khun Eng, “State, Conservation and Ethnicization of Little India in Singapore,” *Urban Anthropology* 27, 1(1998): 1-48.

<sup>47</sup> Urban Renewal Authority, *A Manual for Little India Conservation Area* (1988), 31.

<sup>48</sup> Joel S Kahn, “Culturalizing Malaysia: Globalism, Tourism, Heritage, and the City in Georgetown” in *Tourism, Ethnicity, and the State in Asian and Pacific Societies*, eds. Michel Picard and Robert E Wood (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 99-127.

respondents say that such images are manipulated by the state to mask the racial politics that prevails in the Little India area.<sup>49</sup>

At the same time tourist images have been selectively exploited and manipulated by the state to justify its hegemonic imposition of social, political, cultural and economic control over civil society, so that through tourism, “a political climate favourable to the PAP may be created, ensuring that any challenge to its supremacy is unlikely to succeed”.<sup>50</sup> Following Dovey, urban planning as in heritage conservation lends itself to practices of coercion and seduction in Singapore, thus legitimizing authority and control over its citizens.<sup>51</sup> Hence the more striking visual and colourful aspects of ethnicity are promoted. Chinatown is made more attractive by its “sights, sounds and smells”, while Little India is touted for its “cacophony of colours, sounds and scents”, and the Malay enclave is celebrated for being the only living *kampung* in Singapore.<sup>52</sup> A curious and interesting point that can be argued here is that heritage conservation areas in Singapore have been showcased by the state to project multiracial and multicultural harmony in direct contrast to the 1893 Chicago World Fair (and similar fairs) of different ‘living’ villages that were deliberately designed to present racial hierarchy.

These powerful tourist images reinforce political ideologies that the state wishes to communicate about its management of ethnic identities. History has shown that political regimes make especially powerful symbolic use of the physical environment in such a way that power and identity are embedded in it. In this context, heritage conservation has been manipulated to serve political aspirations, what Clifford Geertz has specifically termed the “cultural balance of power”.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Laurence Leong Wai Teng, “Commodifying Ethnicity: State and Ethnic Tourism in Singapore” in *Tourism, Ethnicity, and the State in Asian and Pacific Societies*, eds. Michel Picard and Robert E Wood (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 71-98. Image management in Singapore, according to Leong, also involves the tight control of the mass media where negative commentaries and critical reports on Singapore invite legal censure and heavy fines from the political leadership.

<sup>50</sup> C M Hall, “Tourism and Political Relationships in Southeast Asia” in *Interconnected Worlds: Tourism in Southeast Asia*, eds. P Teo, T C Chang and K C Ho (Oxford: Pergamon, 2001), 21.

<sup>51</sup> Kim Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>52</sup> Singapore Tourism Board, *Chinatown* (Singapore: Singapore Tourism Board, 2000); Singapore Tourism Board, *Little India* (Singapore: Singapore Tourism Board, 2000).

<sup>53</sup> Clifford Geertz, “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States” in *Old Societies and New States*, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York: Free Press, 1963), 105-157.

Consequently, heritage conservation in Singapore, as Powell argues, has become a powerful ideological tool of state social control, defining and articulating the state's diverse cultures – Chinese, Malay, Indian – in the promotion of the multiracial, multicultural project of nation building and the construction of national identity.<sup>54</sup> As George Yeo, former Minister for Information and the Arts, says, setting up of heritage centres “can be a source of national strength”.<sup>55</sup> Singapore's model of multiracialism and multiculturalism is therefore showcased to both Singaporeans and tourists as successfully accommodating differences. This includes “equal representation of the races in the urban landscapes”.<sup>56</sup> Hence Chinatown (representing the Chinese), Little India (representing the Indians), and Kampung Glam (representing the Malays) project the physical landscape of the country's ethnic diversity. These areas have been ethnicised and historicised to legitimize the notion of a country with social harmony and a sense of national identity, and that Singapore is a unique place “(w)here so many ethnic groups have come together to make it one of the world's greatest melting pots of all races”.<sup>57</sup> In this way the state uses heritage construction to promote a version of identity that supports and helps legitimize its rule by highlighting contradictions between the various ethnic groups in a manner that reinforces state power and control. With emphasis on the CMIO model, differences between the four main ethnic communities residing in Singapore are brought out for the pleasure of the tourists – internal and external – who are encouraged to enjoy ethnic festivals, food, shopping, places of worship, architectural and other traditions by touring ethnic enclaves like Chinatown, Kampong Glam and Little India. Tourism is therefore linked to the re-presentation of ethnicity as “strongly bounded, homogeneous cultural identities, firmly associated with a particular homeland and rooted in strong kinship ties”.<sup>58</sup> Ethnic tourism then is directly associated with

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<sup>54</sup> R Powell, “Erasing Memory, Inventing Tradition, Rewriting History: Planning as a Tool of Ideology” in *Contested Urban Heritage: Voices from the Periphery*, eds. B J Shaw and R Jones (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 85-100.

<sup>55</sup> George Yeo addressing the Sikh community on 30 December 1990, as reported in *The Straits Times* of 31 December 1990.

<sup>56</sup> T C Chang, “From ‘Instant Asia’ to ‘Multi-Faceted Jewel’: Urban Imaging Strategies and Tourist Development in Singapore,” *Urban Geography* 18, 6 (1997): 549.

<sup>57</sup> Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, *Singapore Travel News*, 1976, 6.

<sup>58</sup> Stuart Hall, “New Cultures for Old” in *A Place in the World? Places, Cultures and Globalization*, eds. D Massey and P Jess (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1995), 183.

socially constructed and officially approved racial distinctions. Through tourism, ethnicity has been socially engineered to foster “ethnic consciousness as a resource for nation-building and political development, while at the same time guarding against the emergence of competitive ethnocentrism”.<sup>59</sup> Ethnic heritage sites and various manifestations of cultural forms (for example, ethnic festivals and special events) of the CMIO ethnic communities are therefore marketed by the state as a “celebration of diversity” in Singapore with an overarching national identity based on multiculturalism and multiracialism.<sup>60</sup>

Heritage sites in Singapore exhibit a symbolism by the way they are produced and interpreted by the state, so that by portraying the particular characteristics and stereotypes of the ethnic groups that are associated with the enclaves, colonial representations are revived, appropriated and rearticulated to invent a ‘new’ postcolonial identity that seeks to articulate the relationship between ethnic identity and national identity. At the same time the heritage sites recognise and reinforce the political culture of the present without neglecting the importance of the colonial power, although such sites clearly undermine the attempt of the modern nation state to present itself as postcolonial. This is because the nation state has no alternative sites of multiracialism to present intermingling and therefore there seems to be no attempt to assert the distance that has been travelled since colonial rule.

Realizing that a historical sense of time and place emanates from preserving pockets of the town which retain an old world charm, the state therefore decided to retain some edifices of the colonial heritage. Accordingly in 1988, apart from various redevelopment strategies designed to satisfy tourist demands for “the Oriental mystique and charm best symbolized in old buildings, traditional activities and bustling road activities”, three historic ethnic enclaves, namely Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam were designated to represent Chinese, Indian and Malay traditional cultures.<sup>61</sup> The state decided to conserve these areas as “they represent the

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<sup>59</sup> David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 110, note 5.

<sup>60</sup> Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, *Tourism 21: Vision of a Tourist Capital* (Singapore: Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, 1996).

<sup>61</sup> Wong Kwei Cheong, *Report of the Tourism Task Force* (Singapore: Ministry of Trade and Industry, 1984), 6.

mixture of races and nationalities that make up Singapore”.<sup>62</sup> There was also a growing concern to preserve Asian cultural values that came with these ‘races’ and nationalities by conserving the historic districts for the promotion of, “a sense of continuity and identification with the past”.<sup>63</sup> As Kevin Lynch argues, “A city without old buildings is one without an apparent past and resembles... a man suffering from a loss of memory”.<sup>64</sup> The state hopes to make Singaporeans take pride in their cultural heritage and traditions, thereby establishing a sense of local cultural identity and a sense of rootedness among the ethnic communities which would in turn foster national identity to present and future generations. As mentioned earlier, economic factors were also responsible for the state’s focus on heritage conservation as a means of boosting tourist arrivals and revenue to Singapore following a sharp recession in the Singapore economy during the mid-eighties.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the three historically ethnic areas had been allocated by Sir Stamford Raffles for the different groups in his 1822 Town Plan of Singapore.<sup>65</sup> In 1988 concept plans for all three areas were drawn up by the Urban Renewal Authority so that the conservation of buildings, structures, trades and activities could “provide the sign-posts from the past to the present and which [are] critical to the psyche of a nation”.<sup>66</sup> In the same year conservation manuals and guidelines for these districts were published. The Little India conservation manual of 1988, for example, justifies the conservation of this district thus:

At one time, many of the plain and humble shophouses built during the early phases of Little India’s history were not considered significant in their own right. However, they are now valued historically for reflecting the circumstances of that particular period in time when building technology and

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<sup>62</sup> *The Straits Times*, “Historical Sites Represent Mix of Races and Nationalities Here – Areas to be Preserved,” 27 December 1986. It is to be noted of course that these areas do not necessarily represent a complete mix of the various ethnic groups, because each area has a particular ethnic group as the dominant community.

<sup>63</sup> P Keys, “Conservation as an Integral Part of Urban Renewal,” *Planews* 8, 1 (1981): 44.

<sup>64</sup> Kevin Lynch, *What Time is This Place?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: MIT Press, 1972), 23.

<sup>65</sup> Town Plan of Singapore, published in J Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochinchina etc* (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), 529.

<sup>66</sup> *The Committee on Heritage Report, Singapore 1988*, 27-29.

funds, as well as the migrant mentality of their builders, produced the simple and adaptable structures that they are.<sup>67</sup>

This late recognition of the need to preserve Singapore's colonial heritage and history has prevented the demolition of ancient buildings by the post-independence leadership in Singapore and prompted large-scale restoration work, especially in the last decade and a half.

In brief, the historically constructed narrative of heritage conservation both serves as a tool for nation building and social stability, while simultaneously reducing heritage to a commodity by transforming historical ethnic enclaves into tourist attractions in order to generate revenue for the state. Heritage is thus shown to have political as well as socio-cultural and economic dimensions. Thus the term 'Little India', as the Serangoon Road area is widely known today, was coined by the state with the designation of the Indian settlement as a heritage zone in 1981, conferred conservation status in 1989, declared as 'a historic district' in 1995, and labelled as an 'ethnic quarter' in 1999 combined with the state's tourism drive, all of which plugged 'Little India' into the globalization strategies of the state. The URA and Singapore Tourism Board (STB), the state agencies which coined these terms and labels, saw the potential of the area as a "window into the world of Indian cultural, artistic, religious and culinary achievements and activities..." for tourists as well as for Singaporeans. To the state, Little India was a 'front space' catering to the tourists' gaze and the heritage needs of Singaporeans. Realizing its heritage value, these agencies saw the Little India area as offering locals as well as tourists Indian lifestyles and traditional activities of the past and the present. Thus Little India is constructed in the image of 'Indianness' and as an 'Indian' space that is the 'emotional and commercial centre of the local Indian community' offering the community a sense of ethnic-cultural identity and belonging.<sup>68</sup> The official discourse claims that by the process of

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<sup>67</sup> Urban Renewal Authority, *A Manual for Little India Conservation Area* (1988), 52. The main objectives of the manual are as follows:

- to retain and enhance existing activities which are a part of the historical and cultural heritage at Serangoon Road;
- to restore buildings of historical and architectural significance;
- to retain traditional trades while consolidating the area with new compatible ones;
- to introduce appropriate new features to further enhance the identity of the place;
- to involve both public and private sectors in carrying out the conservation projects.

<sup>68</sup> Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, *Yours to Explore: Little India* (Singapore: Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, 1999), 19.

designating Little India as representative ethnic space the Indian component of the multicultural heritage in Singapore is reinforced, and consequently a sense of national identity forged.

To this end tourist packages are presented by the Singapore Tourism Board in the form of guided walking and trishaw tours (Plate 12) of the ‘authentic’ Indian enclave (Map 3). For instance a typical tour to Little India features Hindu temples Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple (Plate 13) and Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple (Plate 14), Indian spice shops (Plate 15), and Indian-owned shopping centres like Mustafa Centre (Plate 16) as ‘must-see’ travel spots in Little India. The tourist value accorded to Little India by the state is seen in the many sights, sounds and smells of Little India and is glorified for the benefit of tourists in travel magazines, brochures and other travel literature.

The ‘sensescape’ of the conserved quarter now overwhelms: an elderly saffron-clad Indian woman, with fiercely cropped hair, few teeth and a no-nonsense attitude, squats by the five-foot path. She squawks my name at a green-feathered, red-beaked psychic parrot called Mani, which grabs a card from a pack spread of cards with its beak and hops back into the cage. The woman picks a slip of paper corresponding with the number on the card. It is in two pieces, torn through years of use. She pushes the two halves together. “All your wishes will come through. A new relationship will bring great happiness”. There’s more, but I’m shooed away, clients are queuing up. What did I expect for \$2? Around her the men-folk, housewives and video-totting tourists compete for space and place (Plates 7 and 8). Nearby a man in a white *dhoti* (loose loin cloth tied around the waist) sits cross-legged on a raised wooden platform, plaiting a garland of jasmine flowers (Plate 17). The fragrance wafts. Next door a vegetarian restaurant serves its customers. The waiter heaps *dosai* (pancake made of rice flour) and coconut chutney on lines of plates, and glasses of *lassi* (sweet yoghurt) wash down the food (Plates 18 and 19). Upstairs, portions of rice are heaped on to a banana leaf along with curried vegetables, spicy gravies, pickles and *pappadam* (fried rice cracker). People eat with their fingers, cups of *rasam* (pepper spiced soup), *thairu* (curd) and *payasam* (sweet pudding) (Plate 20).

The beating of drums, the clashing of cymbals and the chiming of bells hang in the air outside Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple, where dozens of sculptures of the Goddess Kali adorn the walls (Plate 13). Inside the temple, saris breeze side by side

with *salwar-kameez*, the women devotees paying obeisance to the gods. The waft of *bathi* (incense) floats from the temple and nearby shops. Indian music with a hypnotic regularity blares in the street. A glitter in the goldsmith shops, marriage necklaces, gold bangles, earrings (Plates 21 and 22).

One of Singapore's main tourist attractions, Little India is located very near the city, the quarter stretching from Rochor Canal Road on the west to Kitchener Road and Birch Roads in the east and Race Course Road in the north and Jalan Besar in the south (Map 2). Forming an irregular rectangular area, its main thoroughfare and epicentre is Serangoon Road, running through its middle. Serangoon Road, about 800 meters long, is lined with Indian shops and restaurants on both sides. Serangoon Road is in turn intersected by a multitude of side roads like Buffalo, Kerbau, Cuff, Norris, Veerasamy, Hastings and Hindoo Roads as well as others like Dunlop Street, Clive Street, Mayo Street, Dalhousie Lane, Roberts Lane and Campbell Lane – all reminiscent of past British rule in Singapore and India. You can buy anything Indian here, just like in any bazaar street in India – the choicest silk sarees, elaborate Indian gold jewellery, aromatic incense sticks, religious artifacts, Indian curios, handicrafts, trinkets and utensils, the latest music hits in Hindi or Tamil, freshly ground spices and posters depicting popular Indian film stars (Plate 15).

Interestingly, such products are often selective and based on the state's ethnicised interpretations of what constitutes Little India. It can therefore be argued that the historical district has been manipulated by the state to sidestep the contestations and conflicts that take place between what T C Chang calls "insider" and "outsider" groups – "different groups of people with differing degrees of attachment to Little India".<sup>69</sup> In such an environment, according to him, "global forces of tourism, commercialism and... urban change" clash with the "assertions of Indian identities and cultural heritage."<sup>70</sup> Conflicting meanings and interpretations take place between tourists and locals, Indian and Chinese communities, and between the state's planners and users. My respondents complain (see Chapter 4) that these partial representations of Little India often appear to conceal the racial politics that presents everyday reality between these groups in the life of Little India. They

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<sup>69</sup> T C Chang, "Singapore's Little India: A Tourist Attraction as a Contested Landscape," *Urban Studies* 37, 2 (2000): 343.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.



eclipse, for example, the vibrant communal interactions between different groups of people (for example, different ethnic groups and foreign workers) in Little India, as it assumes that only Indians live here, when in actuality my observation shows that about 50% of the foreign workers are Bangladeshis. Tourist brochures prepared by the STB ignore the presence of the unskilled foreign Indian worker as part of the Little India scene because by implication the physical sight of the Indian worker – whose dark-skinned appearance is perceived to contaminate the frontness of Little India which the state promotes – subverts the state’s perception of what it considers as politically correct for the ethnicisation of Little India.<sup>71</sup> Racial stereotypes are identified here by my respondents as contributing to the state’s programme of ethnic management – see discussion of foreign workers in Chapter 4.4.

The majority of my Indian respondents consider that heritage conservation along ‘race’ and ethnic lines inevitably exacerbates ethnic consciousness and ethnic identity at the expense of national identity. Indian residents and traders in the Little India district, already feeling the impact of increased Chinese encroachment in the commercial life of Little India and a corresponding decline in traditional Indian-owned retail activities and services, perceive that the rich Indian cultural identity is being appropriated by the Chinese. Arguing that the state’s agencies (that is, URA and STB) have adopted a high-handed top-down racial approach to conservation, Murugesan, a 63-year old Indian trader of textile goods says that neither he nor other traders in the area were consulted in the conservation plans. He ventured to volunteer his ideas but these were ignored. He continues: “Like me, other shop owners, residents and workers have identified ourselves with the place and given it meanings and feelings, yet we are not consulted”. To him “conservation is simply to attract more tourists to Singapore. The Government is more interested in its commercial viability than its heritage value”. He suspects that conservation is a way the state manages and manipulates ethnicity by allowing more Chinese to occupy the area. The original Indian owners of some of the Little India shops received poor compensation moneys when the state decided to proceed with conservation/renovation of these shops. Once refurbished, these buildings were priced beyond the reach of the original owners or other interested Indians. “Only the Chinese can afford to buy or rent the conserved shophouses and this literally drove the

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<sup>71</sup> By ‘frontness’ I mean the state’s perspective of Little India as a place that caters to the tourists’ gaze and the heritage needs of Singaporeans.

Indians out of their traditional livelihood and physical space” remarks Murugesan. This is the predominant sentiment among my respondents most of whom say that conservation of the Little India area benefits the Chinese and the tourists more than the Indians, while the URA’s response is that the best way to ensure that a heritage building is safeguarded for future generations is to put it to an economically viable use.<sup>72</sup> The Head of Conservation at the URA maintains: “If a building can be put to good use, and it is successful, there is more scope for keeping it”.<sup>73</sup> Traders, workers and shopkeepers I spoke to are up in arms with URA’s “irresponsible” and “unsympathetic” attitude towards the Indians. Indian spice goods shopkeeper Dayalan summarizes the responses of the others: “How can we afford to pay the high rentals demanded by the conserved shophouses? The Chinese grab them as they have the means”. The consequence is that many traditional Indian trades and activities located in Little India for decades have been displaced by new modern western-style shops and plazas owned by Chinese and dealing in trades and activities far from traditional to the Indian community and which do not, furthermore, provide the symbolism and authentic ambience that was the preserve of the old tradition-laid shophouses. Dayalan’s view is shared by many other interviewees who feel that shops selling franchised Western goods threaten the Indian identity of the place. Such a feeling is exacerbated as these new shops are now owned and managed by non-Indians, mainly Chinese, who being able to afford the high rentals, conduct their activities in what the Indian traders regard as “un-Indian” ways. Several respondents interviewed say that they prefer to shop at the older Indian outlets (especially those selling vegetables, spices, flowers and saris) than at the newer Chinese-owned shops selling ‘modern’ rather than traditional Indian goods. Such a scenario was also reported in the press which commented that there was concern that conserved shops of Little India were not drawing in customers because they were “flocking to older shops in more run down parts of Serangoon Road”.<sup>74</sup> Some respondents perceive that conservation smacks of discrimination against the Indians by benefiting the Chinese more. “We are a minority in Singapore and therefore Little India is important to us.

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<sup>72</sup> *Straits Times Interactive*, 8 June 2003.

<sup>73</sup> Arthur Sim, “Saving Graces”, *The Straits Times* (19 July 2001).

<sup>74</sup> *The Straits Times*, 2 August 1992.

Why can't the Government understand this?" asks the owner of a shop selling saris. Most local Indian respondents agree that the historical and emotional ties which Indians attach to the place give the area a greater importance as a "recognized Indian community space" as well as a "focal point for community interaction" than its economic viability as a tourist centre.<sup>75</sup> The Indians, now more than ever conscious of their identity and ethnicity, resent the increasing occupation of the shops and activities by Chinese which they perceive as imposing a measure of Chineseness into the traditionally Indian area.

My survey shows that only about 30% of the shops in Little India are under direct Indian ownership, and these shops do not form part of URA's conservation programme. Many of the old ones owned by prominent Indian business families were sold to others once the state started demolishing shophouses and building high-rise HDB flats in the area. Many interviewees are of the opinion that the state should honour its promise to safeguard the Indian heritage of the place by firstly limiting the proliferation of non-traditional shops in Little India, and secondly reducing the rentals of the conserved shophouses thereby enabling Indians to conduct ethnic-based products and services and therefore retain the character and identity of Little India. Says 72-year old Govindaraju, a long-time owner of a provision store selling Indian spices, condiments, prayer items, handicrafts and religious artifacts, "We value the Indianness and Indian way of life in this area and therefore take pride in the area because it has an Indian character. Once you allow other races [meaning the Chinese] to occupy this place, Little India will be erased and a part of me is gone...", implying that the Chinese are increasingly challenging Indian claims to the place. Such responses bear out the fact that a sense of rootedness that the state purports to emphasise to its multiethnic population is connected to ethnic consciousness of the place which in turn affects 'race' relations. Clearly Indian resentment against the increased Chinese presence seems to be a feature of the latter's spatial occupation of the area, confirming the view of many interviewees that such tensions between these communities will not augur well for national solidarity. "We cannot hope for people to live happily side by side as Singaporeans in a multiracial society if we have such problems", is the attitude adopted by Nathan, a Tamil teacher residing in the Little India area. Other long-term Little India residents also feel that having lived and

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<sup>75</sup> Sharon Siddique and Nirmala Purushotam, *Singapore's Little India: Past, Present and Future* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), 129, 146.

worked there for many decades, only they can really appreciate the Indian character and atmosphere of the place. Some interviewees are, for example, indignant that the traditionally named Tekka market was renamed (in 1981) without their knowledge – with a “mere stroke of the pen” according to one of my informants - to the Mandarin name of Zhu Jiao Centre, a move they saw as imposing a ‘race’ texture to the area on account of the Chineseness of the name. The old name of Tekka, though of Chinese Hokkien dialect, was something the Indians had come to accept as contributing to the Indian character of Little India. “This was the name by which the old wet market was affectionately known even by the Chinese who themselves did not accept the new name”, says Cheran, who owns a video shop in Kerbau Road adjacent to the market. The renaming issue was, they say, brought up to the state but no satisfactory answer resulted. Responding to renewed appeals from residents and shopkeepers, the state finally reverted to the current name of Tekka Centre. They had also objected to the demolition of the old Tekka market that was first built in 1915 and later rebuilt and renamed Zhu Jiao. The respondents appear to suggest that the state has imposed hegemonic meanings and deconstructed the vernacular identity of the place.

Respondents attribute this state of affairs to the state’s emphasis on ethnicity as well as to the ‘Chineseness’ of Singapore. “It only makes us Indians even more conscious that we have to safeguard and value our identity, all the more as Government has been encouraging the races not to forget their cultural values”, emphasizes Dinakaran, a foreman residing in an HDB apartment at Yishun, a distance away from Little India. Many shop owners, tenants and residents of the area as well as visiting outsiders and tourists, when interviewed, are unanimous in saying that while conservation could help preserve the rich architectural heritage of Singapore’s past, the flip side was that the very charm, distinctiveness and Indian exotica the URA wanted to preserve might disappear. Such a perception is reinforced by Dr Kevin Tan, president of the Singapore Heritage Society, who says that places with old world charm should evolve on their own: “If you want the flavour of the place to stay, leave it alone”.<sup>76</sup> This is similar to the perception of Indian academics Siddique and Purushotam who write that “designating the area for preservation might be all that would be necessary for the survival of the area... rehabilitation would follow as a natural process” and conclude that “living places... should be left to regenerate

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<sup>76</sup> *The Straits Times*, 10 August 2002.

themselves”.<sup>77</sup> Karuppiah, a resident of Little India for over five decades has this to say, “The shops are there but where are the original shopkeepers? We Indians are so used to frequenting the Indian goldsmith shops but now most of these shops are owned and run by Chinese”. Echoing this view, the proprietor of one of the many vegetarian restaurants in Little India remarks:

The only way Little India can continue to function as an Indian community locale is for the Government to provide ways to enable Singapore Indians to continue traditional cultural activities in the area so that the sense of identity and past heritage is sustained and valued.

Indians living and working outside Little India were also sought for their views on the state’s heritage conservation policy. They too visit the area frequently for purchases of Indian necessities, like spices, groceries, traditional Indian clothes, music CDs and videos, gold ornaments, prayer items and other Indian paraphernalia, as well as Indian traditional meals and snacks, or purely for socializing. Like the residents of the area, most of them, particularly those living in Singapore as citizens and permanent residents, agree that conservation has a ‘racial’ dimension, firstly because the shops and spaces taken over by Chinese merchants brought an increased Chinese presence to the area, secondly because the identity and social ambience of the ‘Indianness’ of the place was being gradually erased, and thirdly, as a consequence, Indian ethnic pride, consciousness and identity was reasserting themselves among the Indians. Non-Indians visiting Little India however evaluate the conservation project mainly for its functional aspect. To them the area looks cleaner and more orderly, and therefore the project has been successful. They also seldom frequent the spice shops and others selling traditional Indian items.

Indian respondents also dwell on the importance given to ‘race’ by the state. According to them, state hegemony has dictated the demarcation of boundaries of the conserved Little India area, as in the widening of the boundaries to include parts of Jalan Besar that were originally not part of the Indian enclave (Map 2).<sup>78</sup> Thus, following Jess and Massey, boundaries have become the “expressions of the power

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<sup>77</sup> Siddique and Purushotam, *Singapore’s Little India: Past, Present and Future*, 170.

<sup>78</sup> Urban Renewal Authority, *Little India: Historic District, Singapore* (SNP Printing Pte. Ltd., 1995), 6.

structures of society”.<sup>79</sup> These parts of Jalan Besar have always been occupied by Chinese shophouses-owners operating hardware, electrical and car tyre businesses that were seldom patronized by Indians. By so reworking the boundaries, many interviewees feel that the Indian area has once again been encroached upon by Chinese space, thereby inhibiting the ‘Indianness’ of the place both in character and in numbers of residents. Furthermore Indians tell me that they never shop in the extended area of Jalan Besar because they do not consider this area to be part of Little India and in any case traditional Indian items are not to be found there.

Residents of Little India also highlight how intimate social networks and bonding between the various communities of the place have disappeared after long-time residents of the demolished shophouses were scattered into HDB apartments far away from Little India. Says Palanivelu, a former aged resident of a shophouse in Little India now living in one of the HDB apartment blocks in the area:

Before the HDB flats, we had only shophouses and all the races mingled together freely, visiting one another often in a communal atmosphere. It did not matter whether you were Chinese, Malay or Indian. No one took notice of that. We were like one big family helping one another with our needs. However everything is different now. Now I’m living in a flat and my Chinese neighbours won’t even respond when I smile at them or greet them. I think they are so conscious of their ‘race’ nowadays because the Government has made it so.

Clearly, he implies here that encouragement of ethnic consciousness by the political leadership has led to the disappearance of neighbourliness and friendliness that used to be a feature of living in the area before the HDB flats appeared and before many of the residential shophouses were demolished. Such responses appear to demonstrate that “state-vaunted claims about the benefits of conservation (and tourism) accruing to the nation pale into insignificance when set against... the dislocation of community life.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Pat Jess and Doreen P Massey, *A Place in the World? : Places, Cultures and Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 69.

<sup>80</sup> Brenda Yeoh and W P Lau, “Historic District, Contemporary Meanings: Urban Conservation and the Creation and Consumption of Landscape Spectacle in Tanjong Pagar” in *Portraits of Places, History, Community and Identity in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1995), 65.

Responses from my interviewees further demonstrate that ethnic identity clashes with national identity in the conservation of the Little India heritage project. While a few take the view that highlighting ethnic diversity was not divisive and in fact promoted a multiracial, multicultural society, many express concern that conservation of ethnic areas, including Little India, serves to accentuate differences between the various ethnic communities and limit the state's attempts to promote national identity and nation building. From Sakthivel, a 41-year old Indian artisan residing in an HDB block in the Little India area comes this answer: "Such efforts by the Government give us more reason to reassert our identity and race as Indians. If the various races were to adopt similar attitudes, how can we hope to integrate as a nation?" Chang agrees that such resistance by merchants and residents to the state's approach to heritage conservation has resulted in the "reassertion of Indian identity and community . . . even as Little India is being themed and tamed."<sup>81</sup>

Another issue of heritage conservation popular with respondents is the question of *authenticity*, an ambiguous and contested concept because of the migrant and postcolonial nature of Singapore society. The state is concerned that preservation of the nation's ethnic cultural heritage should promote an awareness of the historical past for the present and future generations to forge a national identity, but long-term Little India residents and shopkeepers who seem to value authenticity see conservation as artificial and as becoming 'museumized'.<sup>82</sup> Consequently they perceive a threat to the Indian ethnic identity of the place, and therefore the cultural heritage of the nation. The conserved shophouses are seen by respondents to look too structured and sterile, merely conserving the architectural outlook of the building and not the traditional activities that are so crucial in preserving ethnic heritage. As one of my respondents, 53-year old Pallavan, a goldsmith living and working in Little India remarks, "Architectural restoration merely fulfils the superficiality of cultural preservation because it has been re-manufactured, leading to a loss of shared culture and history". Continuing he says, "The displacement of long established shophouse residents and traditional activities are characteristics crucial for the identity of the

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<sup>81</sup> T C Chang, "Theming Cities, Taming Places: Insights from Singapore," *Human Geography* 82, 1 (April 2000): 35-54.

<sup>82</sup> P Lewis, "To Revive Urban Downtowns, Show Respect for the Spirit of the Place," *Smithsonian* 6 (1975): 33-40; E Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Ltd., 1976).

place which in turn contributes to its authenticity. The ineffectiveness of the Little India Arcade located across Serangoon Road directly opposite Tekka Centre, is a case in point. The Arcade was set up as part of the Little India Conservation project to retain the existing activities (for example, the five-foot way trading and small activities) that were part of the historical and cultural heritage of Serangoon Road.<sup>83</sup> However, as my informants tell me, most of the businesses have left the arcade because of the high rents and the “dull” business. The whole place, they say, looks “dingy, dark, gloomy, shoddy and lifeless”, because of which it is poorly patronised. Lack of ambience, authenticity and publicity are also to blame though the building is strategically situated in the heart of Serangoon Road. Spatial representations have therefore assumed new social meanings in the struggle between modernization and preservation in the Little India area.

URA contends that “conservation should not entail the fossilization of traditional trades and lifestyles that existed before conservation” for there is a need to adapt with the present context to ensure the relevance and significance of these conserved areas to the society now.<sup>84</sup> But this perspective is not shared by the interviewees, one of whom, 45-year old graphic artist Kumarapathy sums up the general opinion when he says:

Merely conserving the shophouse façade to make it look authentic and not having the traditional activities that take place within them will not help people understand their cultural roots. In this scenario, it is difficult to expect people to appreciate the cultural values and traditions of the various races as a way to better inter-ethnic relations and national cohesiveness. Conservation of historic districts should make Singaporeans aware of their cultural heritage and a sense of who they are so that these conserved landscapes can become successful symbols of national heritage and identity.

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<sup>83</sup> *The Straits Times*, 16 April 1995. Five-foot way trading was a unique feature of small trades operating along shophouse corridors in many parts of colonial Singapore (see Chapter 3.4.4). They required minimum space requirements and nominal rents. Colourful trades, like the parrot fortune teller, flower garland maker and betel nut seller are some remnants still to be found in Serangoon Road, although most of the others have disappeared with urban renewal.

<sup>84</sup> H T Lee, “The Conservation Dilemma,” *Mirror* 27, 15 (1991): 2.



Kumarapathy's argument resonates with the view of Kevin Lynch that "to the extent that change is inevitable, we should at least make sure that it is a humane process..."<sup>85</sup>

#### 8.4 Conclusion

The self-help and heritage conservation policies of the state, like the other social engineering policies described in earlier chapters, generate intense reactions from the minority communities. The main thrust of these reactions revolves around the perceived importance the state accords to Chinese economic and cultural dominance at the expense of minority interests, thereby resulting in disparities between the various communities. Like the British colonial regime, the Singapore nation state is perceived by many minority Singaporeans to have abdicated responsibility for providing social security and support to the various communities, leaving these communities to their own self-help resources. The ironic consequence, the minorities feel, is that it is the Chinese community that is best able to capitalize on the situation with the help of the state and to accelerate its own economic advantage over the Indians and Malays, further widening the problem of 'racial' and class differences. Such differences are made more pronounced by historical perceptions of negative stereotyping and discrimination against these minorities.

As far as heritage conservation is concerned, the state is perceived to have the upper hand in defining heritage and what, how and where to conserve. Respondents argue that the state seems to place more value on the "aesthetic and historical significance of place" and not on the "community value of place" as the lived experiences of the people occupying the place are not appreciated.<sup>86</sup> The Indian minority feels that increased Chinese encroachment into traditional Indian space in Little India impacts adversely on the heritage value and authenticity of the place to the detriment of Indian ethnic identity and pride. All in all, the consensus among my respondents to both self-help and conservation policies, as in the other policies described in this thesis, is that the state is veering away from its declared objectives of

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<sup>85</sup> Kevin Lynch, *What Time is This Place?*, 242.

<sup>86</sup> D Lowenthal, "Age and Artifact: Dilemmas of Appreciation" in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscape*, ed. D W Meinig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 103-128; R E Datel and D J Dingemans, "Environmental Perception, Historic Preservation and Sense of Place" in *Environmental Perception and Behaviour: An Inventory & Prospect*, eds. T F Saarinen, D Seamon & J Sell (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago, Department of Geography, 1984), 131-144.

multiracialism and a common national identity, and that 'race' is looming as a significant factor in its machinations.

## CONCLUSION

“We, the citizens of Singapore,  
Pledge ourselves as one united people,  
Regardless of race, language or religion  
To build a democratic society,  
Based on justice and equality,  
So as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.”

This is the solemn national pledge of allegiance that school children recite everyday at school assemblies throughout Singapore along with singing the national anthem. For centuries, states have relied upon various methods of manipulation to create what Benedict Anderson calls “a sense of imagined community”.<sup>1</sup> In Singapore, classifying citizens by ‘race’ is the orientation that has shaped the nation’s ‘imagined community’ since colonial times.<sup>2</sup> It is on the basis of ‘race’ that national and ethnic identity have been defined and managed by the state. Hence the racial socio-political construction of national identity and ethnic identity could be considered “discursive” and controversial as Chua has argued.<sup>3</sup> Through the state’s hegemonic control ‘race’ is manifested in the various social engineering policies described in this thesis. These strategies for integration are all powerful practices of nation building as they reinforce the construction of a Singaporean national identity, but ‘racial’ politics as conducted through these policies have also become a site - whether acknowledged by the state or not – of conflict between ethnic and national identity, although the state emphasizes that loyalty to the nation should override ethnic identification. Nevertheless one fundamental question asked repeatedly by the state and its citizens is whether ethnic consciousness is bringing the country together

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). Anderson has convincingly argued that nations are “imagined communities” and when many imagined communities are present in a single polity, we have a multicultural society.

<sup>2</sup> As explained in Chapter 5 ‘race’ is often used interchangeably with ethnicity in local discourse, although state leaders and the general public prefer to use ‘race’ in daily usage.

<sup>3</sup> Chua Beng Huat and Eddie Kuo, “The Making of a New Nation: Cultural Construction and National Identity in Singapore”. Paper presented at the ‘Cultural Policy and National Identity Workshop’ at East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii (June 1990), Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, Working Paper No 104, (1991), 4-5.

or pulling it apart. A number of my respondents, particularly Tamils from the lower social and economic levels, perceive and experience that ‘racial’ politics is proving divisive and is not contributing to a cohesive national identity or a fair distribution of social goods. Both of these are felt to be undermined by the resurgence of ethnic consciousness fostered by the state.

As I have discussed in Part I of this thesis, people in Singapore came from different parts of the world and their ethnicity was “embedded in a cultural orientation to a ‘homeland’ that was not Singapore”, a temporary place of sojourn where they had no intention of settling permanently. In the words of Chua, Singapore was an “absence”.<sup>4</sup> As a result, a plural society emerged during the colonial period in which people “mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place, in buying and selling”.<sup>5</sup>

Based on essentialist notions of ‘race’ that were translated into a politics of what Taylor calls “ascriptive ethnicity”, the colonial administration assigned segregated economic, social and residential spaces to the various ethnic communities for the purpose of economic development and modernity.<sup>6</sup> This was achieved by means of the Raffles Town Plan. The specific roles allocated to the various ethnic groups were justified on ideological and essentialist grounds in keeping with Social Darwinist assumptions of hierarchies among racial groups, which were considered to possess inherently different behavioral characteristics or features. With the benefit of such assumptions, the colonial administration viewed the Chinese as enterprising, hardworking and as having a shrewd business sense, Malays as poor, lazy, backward, rural and devoid of business abilities, and Indians as docile, obedient and more suited to working on the plantations and on government construction projects. The consequence was that stereotypes, misconceptions, prejudices, generalizations about race, irrational fears, racial labels, ethnocentrism and discrimination took hold not

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<sup>4</sup> Chua Beng Huat, “Racial-Singaporeans: Absence after the Hyphen”, in *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and Politics of Representation*, ed. Joel S Kahn (New York: St. Martin's Press; Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998) 29.

<sup>5</sup> J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and the Netherland Indies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 304.

<sup>6</sup> R Taylor, “Perceptions of Ethnicity in the Politics of Burma,” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 10, 1 (1982), 7-22.

only between the colonial administration and the ethnic groups but more importantly between the groups themselves. Such essentialist assumptions served to separate communities by highlighting superficial and sometimes artificial differences between them while downplaying their common strengths and interests. These attitudes have not only been accepted in popular discourse but have also been inculcated in the mindset of people and the state in Singapore ever since. Such notions, I have argued in this thesis, have been reinvented by the independent state in the name of ‘national survival’, and used for the promotion of national identity based on economic development, social stability and ‘racial’ harmony.<sup>7</sup> They have formed the basis of various ‘race’-based social engineering policies (described in Chapters 6-8) with ‘multiracialism’ - the ideology that accords equal status to the cultures and ‘racial’ identities of the various communities in Singapore - multiculturalism, multilingualism, multireligiosity and meritocracy underpinning their implementation by an interventionist, authoritarian and paternalistic state. According to Lai Ah Eng, an ideology of pragmatism has enabled the state to integrate “an economic ideology of meritocracy, efficiency and excellence [with] a political ideology of Singapore-style democracy and politics based on consensus rather than conflict and [with] a cultural ideology of CMIO multiracialism”, all based on the localized concept of ‘race’.<sup>8</sup>

One consequence of these policies has been that social and economic inequalities among the various ethnic groups have become a lived reality for these groups with every area of daily life permeated with the tincture of ethnicity and ‘racial’ politics. Additionally, differences in the socio-economic development of the different ethnic groups pose problems to a nation state that pursues a policy of meritocracy and national consciousness in the population while exhorting the people to value their ethnic identities. Though the state maintains that rapid economic progress is the result of the policy of meritocracy, empirical evidence shows that such a policy has benefited the Chinese majority more than the Malay and Indian minority

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<sup>7</sup> The precarious notion of Singapore being a ‘little red dot’ continues to obsess the political leadership.

<sup>8</sup> Lai Ah Eng, *Meanings of Multiethnicity: A Case-study of Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995), 178-179.

communities.<sup>9</sup> Various surveys attest to the widening social and economic gap between the Chinese and the minorities resulting from the policies of the state. The responses of my Indian interviewees suggest that 'race' has been factored into the state's planning and practice with adverse repercussions for the minority communities. Their responses also have the effect of shedding light on to the larger question of the role of national and ethnic identity in the Republic as a whole. While the various policies have provided a solid foundation to enable its citizens to identify with the nation and take pride in themselves, the collision of their ethnic and national identities tends to undermine this relationship and hinder the process of integration. How did this come about?

In the early years after independence the non-Chinese, particularly the Indians, were on the whole greatly impressed with the PAP's nation-building programme. Most of them had no doubts about the genuineness of their rulers' commitment to a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual Singapore nation. As Chineseness had then been deemphasised they were convinced that Lee Kuan Yew and his co-rulers would never succumb to the demands of Chinese chauvinists. However a dramatic change in this regard began with the advent of the decade of the 1980s when Lee's political leadership began to steer towards the Sinicisation of Singapore, a trend that today causes concern and anxiety among the Indians (mainly Tamils) and Malays<sup>10</sup>. With old party stalwarts belonging to the first generation leadership receding into the background, governance and nation-building increasingly began to be driven by Lee's attitudes of Chinese racial and cultural superiority – a result of his eugenics theories that have formed the basis of most of the significant social engineering instruments that impact the lives of Singaporeans. Such attitudes paved the way for increasing PAP hegemony and authoritarian rule based on Chinese dominance.

Family policies for instance are, in the perception of my respondents, weighted heavily in favour of the Chinese majority. Their fertility had declined with a corresponding fall in birth rates in the years after independence. Inspired by selective breeding theories brought on by the perceived superiority of Chinese culture

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<sup>9</sup> Political leaders in Singapore repeatedly voice the rhetoric of meritocracy in their speeches. A speech by former Minister for National Development, S Dhanabalan on 19 August 1989, quoted in *The Straits Times* of 20 August 1989, to mark National Day celebrations is but an example.

<sup>10</sup> Chapters 6-8 provide reactions from my respondents to the various social engineering policies hegemonically enforced by the state in the last three decades or so.

over other Asian cultures, the state had introduced an array of measures to boost the Chinese population, both in 'qualitative' and quantitative terms. My respondents express their discontentment, viewing such measures as disadvantaging them socially and economically. By extension, selective population and labour policies based on a class and 'race' structure were introduced to maintain an arbitrary 'racial balance' and, in the eyes of my respondents, to ensure that the Chinese maintained their dominance. The effect of such policies is that the Indian and other minorities feel threatened and marginalized. They also fear that there is an overemphasis on Chineseness in various spheres of state governance and influence, resulting in discrimination and prejudice in the workplace thereby widening the economic gap between the various ethnic communities. Such perceptions are reinforced by language and education policies and the undue importance given to the Chinese language over other community languages. The Indian and other minorities perceive these 'race'-based policies as providing the Chinese with numerous social and economic advantages that these minorities feel deprived of. Housing policies are no different, with the ethnic quota policy in particular regarded as discriminatory in the way it restricts the freedom of the minorities to sell their flat. The privatization of social security by the state through self-help policies is also considered by my Indian (and Malay) respondents as retarding the process of social cohesion by deepening the divisions between ethnic groups, particularly between those who are economically well placed and those who are not. Heritage conservation in Little India is likewise viewed by my Indian respondents as working against their social and economic improvement. In particular, their cultural identity and traditional activities are, they feel, disrupted by Chinese intrusion into Indian space and the Indian way of life. My respondents ask why the state persists with such policies of inequality that force ethnic groups to strengthen ethnic solidarity with their own group rather than with the national ethos. They further question the state's motives and argue that the political leadership places an overemphasis on Chinese culture and Chinese dominance to the detriment of minority interests and achievement of national identity. They are also unhappy with the leadership's attitude that the political culture of Indians is considered disruptive and therefore not congenial to the maintenance of a stable political order in Singapore.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> As for the indigenous Malays Lee Kuan Yew argues that their political culture is almost entirely

Social and economic inequalities have in turn, according to my interviewees, been further reinforced by stereotyping and discrimination. Following Heisler's point that stereotyping and discrimination by politically dominant elites against minority ethnic group members on the basis of their ethnic group membership is commonplace in multiethnic societies, the Indians and to an ever greater extent the Malays in Singapore have fallen victim to stereotyping because they have been economically less successful than the majority Chinese.<sup>12</sup> As I have demonstrated in my thesis, there is a widening economic gap between the Chinese and these minorities.<sup>13</sup> The themes of socio-economic inequality and stereotyping run through the whole gamut of my informants' responses to the state's social engineering policies that maintain the basis for 'racial' politics in Singapore. These themes – the result of an oversimplified generalization of perceptions enhanced by cultural or racial stereotypes attributed to a particular group – have been the subject of deep historical divisions between the majority Chinese and the Indian, Malay and other minorities, divisions which began in the colonial era and which continue to affect contemporary politics and social relations. They underlie the resentment amongst the minority groups against Chinese ethnocentrism because of the Chinese claim to economic and cultural superiority. Jumari Naiyan of the Association of Muslim Professionals asks:

Does the development of a Chinese-proficient elite who by inference could one day become the decision-makers in our society, also not suggest the possibility that certain biases could emerge further down the road? The Malays are content to get on with their lives – so long as there is no overt trend of Chinese chauvinism taking root in Singapore.<sup>14</sup>

With socio-economic achievements and educational abilities between the main ethnic communities having a tendency to be seen in 'racial' terms as my thesis proves, the perceived prejudices of the majority community are strengthened while exacerbating the sensitivities of the minorities. Such attributes are made worse when the political

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derived from their Islamic faith and that they cannot be trusted to act as fully loyal citizens of a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious Singapore. For instance they are denied equal rights to sensitive positions in the Singapore armed forces.

<sup>12</sup> Martin O Heisler, "Ethnic Conflict in the World Today," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 433 (Sep. 1977): 3.

<sup>13</sup> This economic gap has prevailed since colonial times and Tables 15 and 18-22 show the extent of this gap in the last three decades.

<sup>14</sup> *The Straits Times*, 28 September 1997.



leadership continues to adopt a rhetoric stressing that there is no “quick fix” to getting rid of racial stereotypes.<sup>15</sup> Former Prime Minister and now Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong is content to dismiss “irrational fears” among the “races”,<sup>16</sup> while David Lim, MP, acknowledges peoples’ deep prejudices by admitting, “We are raised to be racial bigots”.<sup>17</sup>

Notwithstanding prejudices arising from perceived cultural differences, state leaders frequently exhort Singaporeans not to allow their different ethnic orientations to get in the way of ‘racial harmony’, the pursuit of ‘racial integration’ and a common national identity. The importance of multiracial harmony has been repeatedly emphasised by the political leadership through the years. Lee Kuan Yew himself, for example, describes it as “the most important single pre-condition for our continued success” and interrogates the various metaphors that could be used to depict this condition.<sup>18</sup> The melting pot, salad bowl, buffet and pot luck metaphors were all tossed about with my respondents to gauge their idea of how multiracial harmony could best be achieved. Their unanimous response has been that the pot luck best symbolizes the preferred image of multiracialism in Singapore. When asked for the reasons for their choice of the pot luck over the other images, most of them say that the pot luck meal means, to quote the words of *Straits Times* correspondent Koh Buck Song, “Every person at the meal is an active participant, having worked to produce a dish he cares about. He is more open to the culinary delights of others. The common meal depicts society in which all come together”.<sup>19</sup> The journalist argues that the “melting pot and the salad bowl both carried a sense of helplessness, as if there was nothing you could do to change things once you climbed inside the cauldron”, whereas “if everyone was responsible for a dish, there would be deeper loyalty and commitment to the shared meal (or nation)”, thereby giving power to each individual

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<sup>15</sup> Speech by Mah Bow Tan, former Minister for National Development, as reported in *The Straits Times* of 21 October 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Speech by former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, as reported in *The Straits Times* of 31 January 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Speech by David Lim, former National Youth Council Chairman and now Member of Parliament, as reported in *The Straits Times* of 31 January 1999.

<sup>18</sup> *The Straits Times*, 8 March 1997. The imagery of food to discuss multiculturalism and multiracialism seems very appropriate in food-loving Singapore.

<sup>19</sup> *The Straits Times*, 8 March 1997.

and community.<sup>20</sup> My respondents reject the melting pot image because of the perception of a loss of individual identity in the assimilation process, while they say that in a buffet diners are passive consumers with little personal involvement or commitment – a situation they relate to contemporary Singapore society. The salad bowl is again not preferred because in this image minority communities are encouraged to retain their cultures that, like a salad, mix to some extent but do not merge. Saying that while there has been some interaction among the ‘races’ over the years but little real understanding, they suggest that it is in the pot luck that there is greater sharing, participation, power, self-esteem, pride, confidence and enjoyment of one another’s dishes representing the different Malay, Chinese, Indian and Eurasian cultures that come together towards integration in a multicultural Singapore society.

Despite the state’s insistence of the priority of multiracial harmony over ethnic loyalties, ethnic boundaries – the result of political, historical, economic and social policies initiated by the colonial administration and continued by the nation state – persist to structure social relations. While the British were content to leave the fragmented ethnic communities to their own resources based on their infamous ‘divide and rule’ policy, the leaders of the nation state have pursued an ideology of integration and ‘multiracialism’ through various nation-building strategies and policies that have encouraged the simultaneous institutionalization of both national *and* ethnic identification on ‘racial’ terms as the state’s recipe for the success of the nation building project.<sup>21</sup> The constant producing of ‘racial’ categories in public life through the national identity card system, schools, the census, cultural entertainment, official forms, records and statistics, and in various other aspects of social policy has resulted in people seeing themselves as “ethnically defined” – as Benjamin has noted: “Multiracialism puts Chinese people under pressure to become more Chinese, Indians more Indian, and Malays more Malay, in their behaviour”.<sup>22</sup> My respondents report that this highlighting of ethnic differences only serves to strengthen the psychological divide between the dominant Chinese and the minority groups, thereby causing

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<sup>20</sup> *The Straits Times*, 8 August 1994, 8 March 1997.

<sup>21</sup> By national identification, I refer to a citizen’s generally positive identification with national symbols, while ethnic identification refers to his self-identification as a member of a particular ethnic group.

<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey Benjamin, “The Cultural Logic of Singapore’s ‘Multiracialism’ ” in *Singapore: Society in Transition*, ed. Riaz Hassan (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), 121, 124.

unease and reinforcing traditional stereotypes. The nation state of Singapore, noted for its pragmatic policies, on the other hand maintains that there is no point pretending that Singaporeans are all alike and that differences do not exist between Chinese, Malay and Indian Singaporeans. In fact state leaders repeatedly, in terms reminiscent of Durkheim, contend that it is the differences between these groups – ‘race’ being the dominant marker of the difference - that provide the basis for understanding, tolerance and acceptance among them. Yet my respondents feel that these ‘racial’ differences are also used to justify inequality, as well as to naturalize Chinese domination. Plate 23 below typifies the state’s approach of constructing a national identity through the appreciation and celebration of difference.

Plate 23



National Day Poster

Ironically, the state views ethnicity as a tool of identity formation that helps in the long-term process of integration through a generalized Singaporean national identity. With the benefit of the state-controlled media, official discourse attempts to manage the ideals of national integration and a Singaporean identity with celebration of ethnic diversity and its cultural manifestations, especially of Chinese culture. In this respect the leadership takes every opportunity to praise ethnic and cultural diversity as an essential ingredient of a unique Singaporean identity. Says former

Foreign Minister and now Minister for Home Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng, "Acknowledging that there are distinct ethnic identities does not mean that we cannot have a national identity as well. They are not alternatives ... This is what makes Singapore unique. We must preserve it and we will".<sup>23</sup> In spite of such periodic assurances of ethnic and national unity, many events over the last decade have evoked racist responses in the local newspapers. September 11<sup>th</sup>, the Bali bombing of October 2002, and the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 all elicited racist responses from mainly Chinese elements towards Malay Singaporeans. Such articles were given wide publicity. On the other hand, the SARS epidemic that originated in some parts of rural China and Hong Kong was largely underplayed in the media. It can therefore be seen that discourses and practices on ethnicity and nationality coexist at different levels.

As my fieldwork shows, the intense ambiguity of 'race' in Singapore means there is a perception among many members of the minority Indian ethnic community (as in the other ethnic Malay and Eurasian minority communities) that 'racial integration', a term so often used by the nation's political leaders, has in the recent past given way to apartheid-type measures that do not augur well for a common national identity that will therefore always remain elusive to Singaporeans. In their view the state has 'strayed' from its declared goals of multiracialism and multiculturalism once emphasized as critical for the achievement of national identity and development. In the eyes of the state, the national self is supposed to dominate the ethnic self, but in practice my predominantly Indian interviewees say and act knowing that this is artificial and forced at best. Indeed they appear to feel that the state's emphasis on multiracialism and support of ethnic identities exerts pressure on Indians to become more Indian just as the other ethnic communities feel obliged to value their own identities. They reason that "top down" bureaucratic and ideological management of cultural and social pluralism is not conducive for inter-ethnic interaction and integration, because social engineering policies enforce over-rigid and stereotyped distinctions between groups. They also feel that this impacts upon and disadvantages the minorities in particular, given the numerical and political dominance of the Chinese. The Indian ethnic minority feels a sense of alienation and manipulation at the economic and cultural importance given by the state to the

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<sup>23</sup> *The Straits Times*, 15 August 1999.

Chinese on the strength of their supposed genetic superiority that is manifested in eugenics programmes promoted hegemonically by the political leadership. Although the state insists that its strict laws, policies and controls have made the nation one of the safest places in the world, that they contribute to social integration and ‘racial’ cohesion in line with the ideology of multiracialism, and ensure the competitiveness and growth of the national economy, my interviewees suggest that they are actually proving discriminatory. Here it is pertinent to point out that the Indian “problem” of poverty, low incomes and low educational attainments is largely a Tamil problem that manifests itself in feelings of discrimination by the state and by the Chinese majority.<sup>24</sup>

One could of course argue that the state creates and manages ethnic and national identity as part of its legitimizing project because, as the platonic guardian over and above civil society, it has the duty to assiduously manage all aspects of everyday life in the name of social harmony. Besides, managing ethnic groups is top on the state’s list of priorities; as Milne and Mauzy have described: “The Chinese are a majority in Singapore, but a minority in the region; the Malays are a minority in Singapore but a strong majority in the immediate region”.<sup>25</sup> Given the claimed ‘racial’/cultural differences of the various ethnic groups, it could equally be argued that such governance is inspired by the discourse of biological essentialism and hegemony which bind its social engineering policies together. Hence there are family policies that, for example, encourage the naturally ‘highly competitive’ and ‘money-driven’ Chinese to increase their numbers while curbing the procreating ‘instincts’ of the minorities, especially the Malays.

The subject of ‘racial’ politics as manifested in the various social engineering policies described in this thesis demonstrates the reality of how ethnic identity intersects and collides with national identity. ‘Racial’ politics is best seen by my substantially Indian minority respondents in these instruments of the state. As a consequence ‘race’ relations between the various ethnic groups have been affected leading to a rise in ‘racial’ polarization in a society “more conscious of racism than

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<sup>24</sup> Expatriate and other educated local Indians show no special keenness to offer any real help to the Tamils.

<sup>25</sup> Robert S Milne and Diane K Mauzy, *Singapore Politics under the People’s Action Party* (London: Routledge, 2002).

sexism”.<sup>26</sup> Various surveys conducted over the years also attest to this state of affairs. By way of illustration, a survey commissioned by the Ministry of Community Development and Sports in 2001 showed that while virtually all of the 1481 respondents who participated indicated that they felt proud to be Singaporean (97%) they also felt a strong sense of identity with their own ‘racial’ and religious groups. A *Straits Times*’ study conducted in mid-2002 revealed that of the three main ‘races’, the minorities were more sociable than the Chinese. The latter were characterized by their “indifference” because they saw “no immediate need to reach out to others” as they were already comfortable, assured as the majority community and were prepared to mix with other ‘races’ only when it was “necessary”. The study also showed that many people still clung to fixed notions and stereotypes of others. Some interviewees felt that “racial harmony” was, at best, a “superficial notion” and cited Racial Harmony Day as evidence to point out that the “forced getting-along contributes to the notion that we can achieve harmony by simply turning up for these events, without making an effort to mingle outside of them”.<sup>27</sup> Other respondents felt that though well intentioned, Racial Harmony Day did more harm than good to the cause of multiracialism in Singapore. Yolande Chin and Norman Vasu writing for *The Straits Times* argued that marking the race riots that erupted in Singapore in 1964 during the Prophet Muhammad birthday procession via the Racial Harmony Day could have unintended repercussions. They cited “awareness about inter-racial ‘realities’ in a negative fashion,” which could force people to see the “issue of race as a fault line” they may not have seen before. In the aftermath of 11 September 2001 and the pressing need to celebrate and respect ethnic diversity in Singapore, the association between terrorism and “unstable” race relations, they felt, could have been “unwittingly reinforced” giving rise to potential dangers of Singaporeans viewing each other through “racial lenses” because of a sense of insecurity.<sup>28</sup>

A survey conducted in 2002 by the Institute of Policy Studies concludes that the Chinese feel less comfortable, compared to Indians and Malays, when they are put in a room full of people who are not of the same ‘race’ as the Chinese. On this subject of interethnic mixing, the study found that while seven out of ten Malays and

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<sup>26</sup> *The Straits Times*, 26 November 1993.

<sup>27</sup> *The Straits Times*, 9 August 2002.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 June 2006.

Indians invited people of different ethnic backgrounds to celebrate special occasions like birthdays and weddings with them, only one in two Chinese actually did so. Such a scenario, the report points out, has been prevalent since a 1990 survey conducted by the Institute. Again, the study concluded that the Chinese were less supportive of national policies (like ethnic quotas and self-help groups) to promote “racial harmony” and interethnic mixing.<sup>29</sup> A further demonstration of current realities is revealed in an Institute of Policy Studies survey conducted in 2003 which revealed that while the Chinese majority showed only a 78% support for the concept of a multiracial society in Singapore, Malays and Indians were more supportive (88% and 83% respectively). Surveys show that school children tend to mix with friends from within the same ethnic group.<sup>30</sup> Such findings are also reflected among university students. For instance, a survey (conducted by the National University of Singapore Political Association in 2004) of 748 NUS students (mostly Chinese) showed that they were more comfortable identifying with their ‘race’ than with their nationality. This survey also revealed that the current racial quotas in public housing policies had not encouraged much “racial” interaction. Only 7.4% of respondents communicated with their neighbours of different ethnicities on a daily basis, while 44.3% almost never talked to such neighbours, reinforcing conclusions reached in previous ethnographic surveys.<sup>31</sup> The survey also demonstrated that 60.3% of the Chinese respondents supported the racial quota policy, while only 50% of the Malays, 36.6% of the Indians and 35.7% of ‘Others’ did. Elderly interviewees are all unanimous in saying that in the 1960s and 1970s there was greater mixing and interaction between the ‘races’ because of the state’s emphasis on ‘racial’ similarities rather than differences as well as its emphasis on national identity rather than ethnicity, according to another *Straits Times* report.<sup>32</sup> Kessler, a 50-year-old transport operator, for

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<sup>29</sup> Reported by Ooi Giok Ling in an article entitled “Allowing for Ethnic Diversity boosts National Identity” in *The Straits Times* of 18 June 2002. She however argues that the strong support for ethnic identity at the expense of a national culture does not diminish the likelihood of developing a “strong, or even stronger, national identity”, and that there is evidence showing a greater commitment to the reconciliation of ethnicity with national identity. The majority of Singaporeans, for example, regard themselves more as citizens than the ‘race’ they belong to. Such a conclusion however is not in full agreement with my Indian respondents.

<sup>30</sup> *Today*, 12 August 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Lai Ah Eng, *Meanings of Multiethnicity*.

<sup>32</sup> *The Straits Times*, 17 January 2004.

example, speaks of the 1960s and 1970s as being the “best years – we were told we must have a Singaporean identity, not a Chinese, Malay, Indian or Eurasian identity”. Continuing he says, “But the races began drifting apart in the late 1970s, when I think we started accentuating the differences between the races. I feel sad that this has happened”.

In an interview with Raj Vasil, a senior Government leader revealed that “not many people think of ethnic integration in Singapore”.<sup>33</sup> Some government leaders agree that state policies imposed hegemonically and with a “paternalistic discipline akin to colonial paternalism” are hurting rather than building cohesiveness.<sup>34</sup> Inderjit Singh, Member of Parliament, for example, reiterates that policies and legislation alone cannot bring about “racial and religious harmony”.<sup>35</sup> Another Member of Parliament Dr Lau Teik Soon points out that the state, instead of allowing for the separate development of the different cultures, should be emphasizing integration of the cultures. “To put it bluntly, we cannot be a predominantly Chinese state” he says.<sup>36</sup> While the leadership frequently calls for more interaction between Singaporeans of “different races,” there is the widespread acknowledgement among the political elite as well as my respondents that interaction and attitudes must go beyond the social superficialities of daily contact between the peoples.

The national identity card system - the way Singaporeans are officially classified by ‘race’ - for example, has been the subject of much debate among the Singaporean public. A person’s ethnic identification is specified on identity cards under the title ‘race’. While inadequate in reflecting the ethnic diversity in Singapore, it is also accepted that it reinforces ethnic loyalties and creates tension between the peoples. A large number of my respondents therefore consider that the word ‘race’ should be deleted from the identity card. They also feel that it has lost its relevance in the highly cosmopolitan nature of globalised Singapore. To a proposal from an Indian woman at a forum on race relations that ‘race’ should be excluded from the identity card because people should not be judged on the basis of it, a Chinese woman

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<sup>33</sup> Raj Vasil, *Asianising Singapore: The PAP’s Management of Ethnicity* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1995), 102.

<sup>34</sup> C J W-L Wee, “Mediating ‘Progress’: the National Narrative of Economic Development and Liberalism in Singapore,” *Communal/Plural*, 9, 2 (2001): 225.

<sup>35</sup> *The Straits Times*, 12 October 1999.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 June 1990.



retorted, “Even if you take it out, people can still tell if you’re Malay, Chinese or Indian. Why not just be proud of your race, of who you are?”<sup>37</sup> Such utterances lend weight to the perception of the non-Chinese that race remains more important as an ethnic identifier to the Chinese – a perception that was upheld in an Institute of Policy Studies survey conducted in 2002.<sup>38</sup> While it could be argued, as *Straits Times* journalist Asad Latif has done, that “classifying citizens by race is an aspect of an official policy that simultaneously protects the various ethnic groups in Singapore by recognizing their uniqueness and guaranteeing their right to exist”, the consensus among my respondents is that there is a need to go beyond ‘race’ in defining the Singapore identity and achieving national integration.<sup>39</sup> Several of my respondents agree with Latif’s comment that one way this could be achieved is by replacing the multiracial model with a multicultural one, the argument being that unlike “race which sets communities apart from one another, culture transcends ethnicity” and promotes greater cohesiveness. In a similar vein, other members of the public argue that the solution would be to “abandon the rigid official ethnic categories of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others to allow an unhindered pluralism to emerge”. Such a solution they feel would provide a “cross-cultural connector to transcend the races”.<sup>40</sup> These responses find more common ground in the words of Dr Kevin Tan of the National University of Singapore:

The state’s construction of multiculturalism, which is naturally designed to suit its own political agenda, will never coincide with the community’s idea of culture. Multiculturalism cannot be constructed artificially. It must be allowed to evolve and be recognized as a state of mind.<sup>41</sup>

‘Race’ as a primary principle of social organisation in Singapore is also criticised by many of my respondents because it has been made the subject of far-reaching and vitally significant social engineering policies exercised through ideological tools of coercion, control and consent. They contend that such policies

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<sup>37</sup> Reported in *The Straits Times* of 21 October 2002.

<sup>38</sup> Ooi Giok Ling, “Allowing for Ethnic Diversity boosts National Identity.”

<sup>39</sup> *The Straits Times*, 18 February 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 28 September 1997.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

enforced through hegemony have not really fostered integration between the various communities; rather they have given rise to increasing ethnic loyalties at the expense of national identity, an argument that pervades this thesis.<sup>42</sup>

‘Race’ is hegemonic in Singapore because it has been socially and politically constructed by the postcolonial state and historically grounded from colonial rule. As a result of massive intervention and control race has been hegemonically imposed by the state. A situation has therefore arisen whereby unequal opportunities have resulted mainly because of the state’s perception of the superiority of the dominant community. The principle of multiracialism espoused by the nation state provides for equality of all Singaporeans irrespective of race, language or religion, yet the state’s construction of ‘race’ has made such an equality difficult to achieve in the perception of many of my respondents. It is obvious therefore that though the postcolonial state resorts to hegemonic and ideological forms of power these are not achieved easily. This is because responses from my Indian and Malay informants indicate resistance from such minority groups. Such resistance is manifested by feelings of unhappiness and anxiety among them. This is an inevitable consequence as many theorists have pointed out – see pg. 21-22. Of course the majority Chinese have no problems with the state’s conception of forms of power because they have benefited from the government’s policies substantially more than the minorities have.

There is also a general feeling among my respondents that “staged” ethnic Malay, Chinese and Indian performances at schools’ cultural festivals and at national functions do not ‘make’ a culturally sensitive Singaporean. A nationalism based on an imposed subscription to such staged symbols is, according to them, banal and perfunctory at best, unresponsive and divisive at worst. Celebrating diversity this way could do more harm than good, they say. One of my respondents, Kalaimani, an horticultural assistant, made this observation:

When the unique cultural practices of each ethnic community are emphasised, the focus is too much on our differences, rather than what different ethnic groups have in common. This adds to the distance between the dominant community and the others, and also accentuates racial stereotyping.

Academics Chin and Vasu argue that cultural performances by ethnic groups do not “accurately reflect the natural setting in which the races interact on a daily basis” and

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<sup>42</sup> The thesis demonstrates that hegemony was also practised by the colonial administration with the main objective of implementing the colonial project.

that they can “accentuate stereotypes of each race and discipline individuals in the same way” that the CMIO compartmentalization constantly does. Consequently, commentators perceive that skin colour becomes the stereotypical gaze of the people while ironically they are frequently exhorted to “look beyond that”.<sup>43</sup> What was required, my respondents feel, was closer interaction and integration between the ethnic groups by learning to appreciate each other’s lifestyles, religious practices and customs. For example, a *Straits Times* straw poll<sup>44</sup> as well as other publications show that few Singaporeans know the reasons for the customs of other ethnic groups as in the following situations: Why Indian women wear *pottu* (dot on the forehead), why Indians traditionally greet each other by bringing both palms together known either as *vanakkam* or *namaste* (greetings), why Muslims cannot keep dogs as pets, why Muslims fast during *Ramadan* (fasting month), why wine is served at some Eurasian funerals, why giving a clock to a Chinese person should be avoided, why Chinese hang mirrors outside their doors, why Buddhists avoid eating meat on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month or why Sikh men keep long hair.

The concept of a cohesive and distinctive national identity is still fluid and paradoxical in post-independent Singapore with ‘racial’ communities owing primary loyalty to their cultural ethnicity rather than to the idea of a Singapore nation. Thus what it means to be Singaporean still remains an important cultural and national dilemma. This is so despite high levels of ethnic and national identification. The resurgence of state-directed and state-managed ethnic consciousness will always pose a dilemma in the government’s efforts to forge a national identity based primarily on economic grounds. State leaders frequently ask whether the Chinese, Malays, Indians and Eurasians should separately and actively promote whatever it is that identifies them as a distinct community, or whether they should de-emphasise their Chineseness, Malayness, Indianness and so on, and work together instead to stress their similarities and forge a Singaporean identity. There is, in brief, an ongoing problem of constituting the integration of the nation, and of finding a way to come to terms with its past and create reconciliation across historically produced ethnic and class divides. The dynamics of conflicting ethnic, cultural and national identities will always prevail in Singapore, manifesting itself in anxieties pertaining to

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<sup>43</sup> *The Straits Times*, 29 June 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Reported in *The Straits Times* of 5 June 1989.

hegemonically constructed state policies on language, culture and religion; ethnic relations in various domains; ethnic-based organisations and activities; ethno-religious relations and issues; the negotiation of commonalities and differences; conflict management and geo-political influences.

Finally, how do these anxieties impact on the Indian community's stake in Singapore as it strives to integrate into local society? The concerns of its members exemplify the impact of social engineering policies on the intersection of Indian ethnic identity and national identification leading to the processes of de-ethnicisation and re-ethnicisation amongst them. The de-ethnicisation process has demonstrated, as my interviews show, that many young and "contented" third generation Singaporean Indians have "survived" and succeeded because they seem to have come to terms with the realities of living in Singapore with the dominant community. I observe that some of them, for example, have adopted Chinese characteristics, values and even speech mannerisms. On the other hand, several Singaporean Indians - mainly Tamils - interviewed are pushed to embracing a deepening sense of re-ethnicisation, partly because many of them have concerns of negative stereotyping and 'racial' prejudice by the Chinese majority and the perception that the Chinese majority does not sufficiently appreciate their sensitivities and sentiments. Issues like Chinese carelessly talking in their own language in the midst of non-Chinese, not offering jobs to Indians even though the latter feel they are well qualified for the position, the public housing ethnic quota policy, encroaching into Indian space in the Little India area, and a general sense of a Chinese chauvinistic dominance that is perceived to prevent them from participating actively in the mainstream of national life have been frequently highlighted by my research. Their articulation of ethnic identity is also given a new dimension by the increasing presence of professional and non-skilled labour from India and elsewhere resulting from transnational migration. The state on its part takes pains to frequently assure the Indian and other minorities that their interests will not be jeopardized and that the minorities should also understand and appreciate the concerns and anxieties of the majority community. In this context it would be remiss and indeed irresponsible of me not to acknowledge the fact that there were also several Indians from various levels of life I interviewed who say that neither do they feel marginalised, threatened or alienated by the state's social engineering policies nor by the perceived dominance of the Chinese. They also do not encounter any problem reconciling their ethnic and national loyalties in line with the state's

ideology. Living as a minority community inevitably meant having to negotiate their everyday lives with other ethnic communities but given the pragmatic governance of the political leadership they say they are comfortable with the existing identity politics in Singapore. Such Indians comprising mainly professional expatriate workers from India as well as educated local Malayalees and other affluent Indians are predominantly from the upper strata of Singapore society and enjoy a better standard of living than their Tamil counterparts. They do not lag behind the Chinese all that much in terms of economic power and wealth. On the whole they find few real impediments in running profitable businesses or securing top salary-earning positions in business and industry. As a result, unlike the Tamils and the Malays, they are neither overly concerned about perceived discrimination against the non-Chinese nor with the increasing domination of the Chinese in Singapore's economy, governance and culture. This is also the stance adopted by some Indians enjoying lesser economic rewards. The majority of such Indians feel they have "arrived", having emerged from the debilitating slum conditions of the colonial period and since then acquiring "unexpected" material benefits like new government housing and all the trappings of modern consumerism. Wong Kan Seng, former Foreign Minister and currently Deputy Prime Minister/Minister for Home Affairs and other senior political leaders have also frequently advised minorities that Singapore's national identity will continue to be a multiracial and multicultural one with equal opportunities for all.<sup>45</sup> However, it is an inevitable fact of identity politics that cultural minorities in Singapore, as in other multicultural societies, will always seek to preserve and define their own identities in the intersection of nationalist and multiculturalist discourses.

While there does exist a strong sense of national consciousness and integration especially among younger Singaporeans as my interviews suggest, it can be argued that such bonds are giving way to increasing feelings of ethnic affiliation. A number of my respondents are unanimous in suggesting that such a bias towards ethnic identity is stronger if only because it is, they say, equated with certain values most of which are materialistic in nature. The culture of consumerism along with the compulsive pursuit of money and possessions brought on by rapid modernisation, vast improvements in education and living standards, strong family values, law and order, safety and security, peace and stability, cleanliness and good political governance has

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<sup>45</sup> Reported in *The Straits Times* of 15 August 1993.

created what many cynically consider as the most important social engineering project in contemporary Singapore. In practical terms this mode of culture is amusingly termed the 6 Cs, being cash, condominium, car, career, country club and credit card. These 6 Cs are perceived to be a way of life that measures success by what can be achieved in financial terms. Such an insatiable obsession for material wealth has fused national dreams with personal aspirations – hence scholar Ooi Giok Ling’s finding that it is “not surprising that Singaporeans describe their sense of belonging and rootedness in practical and material terms”.<sup>46</sup> Such a consumerist pattern of behaviour whereby people are perceived to become more self-centred and oriented towards projecting their own self-image, personal needs and material aspirations arguably means the weakening of the bonds of social care or commitment to a more equal distribution of life chances. In an article entitled “Singapore Place or Nation”, Professor Linda Lim blames the state’s economic priority and other policies “for engendering apathetic and passive Singaporeans with little affiliation for their country beyond its economic value”.<sup>47</sup> Similarly another reader, writing to *The Straits Times* on 24 June 2006, asks why the primacy of economics and materialism has placed our courtesy and manners “on the back burner” – he was referring to a recent *Readers’ Digest* international survey that placed Singapore a low 30 out of 35 cities.

Singapore Indians find themselves taking root in Singapore society and identifying with the overall national objective of integration along with fellow Singaporeans of increasingly complex ethnicities and identities. Among the new generation of Singapore Indians, national identification appears strong even as youngsters identify with a global diasporic Indian culture. In this process, my research shows, they seek to strike a balance between preserving ethnic diversity and being “stoutly Singaporean” as George Yeo, former Minister for Information and the Arts and currently Minister for Foreign Affairs, advised in a speech to SINDA.<sup>48</sup> It is clear that most agree with the *principle* of integration through an overriding national identity (even if understood in state terms as a racially multi-stranded beast). Yet this

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<sup>46</sup> Ooi Giok Ling, “Allowing for Ethnic Diversity boosts National Identity”. A quick glance at the Readers’ Forum Page in the local newspapers will confirm that most readers are obsessed with issues affecting their finances or cutting down expenditure but seldom on issues dealing with national identity or racial cohesiveness.

<sup>47</sup> *The Straits Times*, 19 June 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Reported in *The Straits Times* of 15 August 1993.

identity is agreed to partly because it is understood as a protection against the ethnic domination of the majority Chinese. All of this shows, in sum, that the racialization of the world created by the British and appropriated by the independent Singapore state both enables and disables social relationships in Singapore. But the experiences of my informants show that many are seeking to transcend the official categories of race too, not necessarily to deracinate themselves but to make a different range of 'racial' practices possible.

### **Appendix A - Random press cuttings and reports (see Chapter 5.1)**

Appendix A is a sample collection of random press cuttings and reports that are self-explanatory. The words 'race' and 'ethnic' are often fudged and used synonymously in the Singapore context. The fudging between these words is sometimes taken to extremes when used together – as in “ethnic races” – to form a sentence. The samples also show that political leaders, the public, academics as well as the media all use the word 'race' to refer to the ethnic groups.



<http://www.singaporeexpats.com/about-singapore/culture-and-language.htm>

## **:: Singapore Culture**

Singapore is a cosmopolitan society where people live harmoniously and interaction among different races are commonly seen. The pattern of Singapore stems from the inherent cultural diversity of the island. The immigrants of the past have given the place a mixture of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and European influences, all of which have intermingled.

Behind the facade of a modern city, these ethnic races are still evident. The areas for the different races, which were designated to them by Sir Stamford Raffles, still remain although the bulk of Singaporeans do think of themselves as Singaporeans, regardless of race or culture. Each still bears its own unique character.

The old streets of Chinatown can still be seen; the Muslim characteristics are still conspicuous in Arab Street; and Little India along Serangoon Road still has its distinct ambience. Furthermore, there are marks of the British colonial influence in the Neo-Classical buildings all around the city.

Each racial group has its own distinctive religion and there are colorful festivals of special significance all year round. Although the festivals are special to certain races, it is nonetheless enjoyed by all.

In Singapore, food is also readily and widely available. There are lots of cuisines to offer. We have, Chinese, Indian, Malay, Indonesian and Western, Italian, Peranakan, Spanish, French, Thai and even Fusion. It is very common to savour other culture's food and some of the food can be very intriguing. Indian food are relatively spicier, whereas Chinese food is less spicier and the Chinese enjoy seafood. Malay cooking uses coconut milk as their main ingredient, that makes their food very tasty.

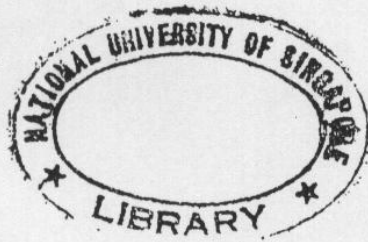
You can refer to our [Eating in Singapore](#) section for a list of recommended food outlets in Singapore.

## **:: Religion in Singapore**

Most Singaporeans celebrate the major festivals associated with their respective religions. The variety of religions is a direct reflection of the diversity of races living there. The Chinese are predominantly followers of Buddhism, Taoism, Shenism, Christians, Catholics and some considered as 'free-thinkers' (Those who do not belong to any religion). Malays have the Muslims and Indians are Hindus. There is a sizeable number of Muslims and Sikhs in the Indian population.

Religious tolerance is essential in Singapore. In fact, religions often cross racial boundaries and some even merge in unusual ways in this modern country. Younger Singaporeans tend to combine a little of the mysteries of the older generation with the realistic world that they know of today.

Religion is still an integral part of the cosmopolitan Singapore. Many of its most interesting buildings are religious, be it old temples, modern churches, or exotic mosques. An understanding of these buildings do play a part in contributing to the appreciation of their art.



STRAITS TIMES

10 FEB 1992

## Understand other cultures for more gracious society

I REFER to the report "Videos on ethnic customs, festivals to be out soon" (ST, Jan 24).

The move by the Ministry of Community Development to screen video docu-dramas to help Singaporeans understand the customs and festivals of the various ethnic groups is a good thing.

This in turn would strengthen friendship among the various races.

It is important to have an open mind about understanding one another's customs and the way the various ethnic groups go about celebrating their respective festivals.

We should not think that by learning about the customs of others, we will be

influenced by their lifestyle.

As it is, Malays, Indians and Chinese already visit each another on festive occasions.

But when Malay, Indian and Chinese Singaporeans are able to appreciate and respect each other's customs, such an understanding will truly be the social glue that binds and strengthens multi-racial Singapore.

Our society would then become a more tolerant, harmonious and gracious one.

Some may scoff that this is no more than a dream but where there is a will, there is a way.

**SEBASTIAN TAN**  
Singapore 1337



STRAITS TIMES

- 4 MAR 2000

## **CULTURAL IDENTITY**

*'I am Singaporean but I am also Malay. Race gives us a sense of cultural identity. It reminds us of our roots. That is something we must not forget.'*

— Teacher Saripah Abas, 31

## **CENTRAL ROLE OF RACE**

*'Race and racial differences are in one way or another built into the Pledge, self-help groups, ethnic quotas for HDB allocations, National Day performances. Also, most official representations of the people of Singapore show four "races".'*

— Sociologist Tan Ern Ser

## **ETHNIC PRIDE**

*'They are less conscious of race on a pragmatic basis in their daily lives and interactions, but want to keep race in their IC as they feel a deep-rooted pride in their ethnic identity.'*

— Dr Tan Chi Chiu, executive director  
of the Singapore International Foundation,  
on the preference of people below 30



- 9 FEB 2002

**FLEXIBLE POLICY**

*If we allow one community to express that identity, then other communities will also ask for it and we will heighten the differences... This policy is not hard and fast. It will change with time as we begin to understand better how we can bring the different communities together at a very young age.*

— Dr Yaacob Ibrahim

**NO DISCRIMINATION**

*'As a multi-racial country, we cannot afford to discriminate against any race, for this will undermine social cohesion and the very basis upon which we organise our society.'*

— Dr Tony Tan

# DPM Tan stresses need to maintain harmony

RACIAL harmony and social cohesion in Singapore are being seriously challenged, said Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan, but the nation can come out of it stronger if good sense prevails and it focuses on maintaining harmony and cohesion.

Speaking at the official opening of Chevrons, the new Singapore Armed Forces' Warrant Officers and Specialists clubhouse at Boon Lay Way, he added that the outlook remained hopeful.

Though he did not spell out what recent events he was speaking about, it is understood he was referring to the way Singaporeans have handled the *tudong* issue and the arrest of 13 people for terrorist activities.

Dr Tan, also the Defence Minister, said: "Instead of pretending that all is well, we have confronted the issues squarely, knowing what is at stake."

"The vast majority of

Singaporeans, of all races and religions, have responded in a calm and rational manner."

This did not happen by chance, he added, but was the result of the Government's efforts to strengthen Singapore's social fabric and enlarge the common space for people of all races and religions to come together.

Recent events had not affected unity in the army, and it was still a cohesive unit, he said.

This, he added, was also because the armed forces practises meritocracy.

"As a multi-racial country, we cannot afford to discriminate against any race, for this will undermine social cohesion and the very basis upon which we organise our society."

He described warrant officers and specialists as the "backbone of our fighting force", noting that they played an important role in fostering esprit de corps,

camaraderie and cohesion in the SAF.

The clubhouse, he added, provided a conducive environment for forging even closer ties among servicemen.

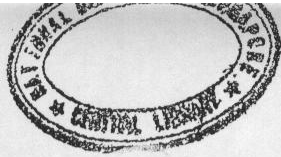
Named after the V-shaped stripes that denote warrant officers and specialists' ranks, Chevrons is three times bigger than the old clubhouse at Beach Road, and houses a wider range of amenities for its 30,000 members.

These include a seafood restaurant, food mall and banquet rooms, a state-of-the-art gymnasium, a 24-lane bowling alley and a swimming pool.

Its members can also use the pool hall-cum-bar, jackpot room, discotheque, karaoke lounge and six chalets within the premises.

There is even a child development centre that provides nursery and kindergarten classes, in which they can enrol their children.





STRAITS TIMES  
14 APR 1990

# Lay foundation of empathy

AS I see it, Singaporeans do have a form of identity which manifests itself in our tolerance of other races and religions, certain patterns of social behaviour and a surface type of unity.

By surface, I mean that we are politically united, but deep down inside, we don't really feel a kind of permanent, emotional bond tying us all together. A true national identity should be the latter, encompassing the political, social and artistic aspects.

We cannot hope to have such an identity unless we truly understand not only the culture of our own race, but also those of other races. This form of education should be nurtured early, in the schools.

We should also not neglect the minorities. Many of those in the younger generation who belong to minority groups have little or no knowledge of their heritage.

For example, I am a Peranakan by birth, but all my life, I have considered myself a Chinese, simply because there is nothing in my living environment that conveys my Peranakan heritage to me.

I spoke English and Mandarin at home and in school. I cannot speak a word of "Baba" Malay.

Many people lump Peranakans in to the same category as the Chinese. But we have our own unique culture. Because we don't understand it, we feel alienated from it.

Besides the racial factor, we also have to consider religion. Religion is an explosive issue, more so than race, as it is a form of spiritual belief that exists on a higher plane of emotion.

Living in a multi-religious society, we should have a surface understanding of the values of other religions besides our own. We cannot merely tolerate other races and religions; we have to evaluate their place in our Singapore culture.

A national identity is something that takes shape over a period of time. As we grow as a nation, and grasp more of the beliefs and values of our fellow countrymen, greater interaction between the races will result, thereby creating a bond between all Singaporeans.

The creeping of English into our lives has been said by many to have eroded our respective cultures. That may be true, but slowly we have to stop thinking of ourselves as Chinese, Malays or Indians, but as Singaporeans. English will act as the means of inter-racial communication.

At this point, I would like to stress that we are not transfusing Western blood into our Asian culture by the use of English. Singlish has risen to become a national phenomenon. It is something uniquely Singaporean. Everybody uses it in his daily life. Singlish can not only act as a communication mode, it can also enrich our national identity.

Basically, we should lay the foundation of empathy between the races. There should not be any attempt to hasten the formation of a truly Singaporean Singapore. If we try to force it to come about, we only stifle it, especially in the artistic sense. (Observe the first few pathetic attempts to create a "national" costume).

This identity will be a representation of the shared values of Singaporeans, not a "rojak" of all things Chinese, Malay, Indian and "others".

The day will come when it will be firmly entrenched in our beings. Only then can we tell the rest of the world with pride: "I am a Singaporean."

Clarissa Oon  
Student  
Singapore 1544



STRAITS TIMES  
12 OCT 1990

# Let's play down our ethnic differences

FOR many years, Singapore has been a successful multi-ethnic society. That is an achievement we should be proud of.

However, it is disturbing to note that recently, measures have been suggested or taken which could undermine multi-racial harmony.

There has been an increasing trend on the part of some public officials to deal with national issues along racial lines. I am referring to issues such as education, population planning, immigration and related social issues.

I am concerned that if those in power continue along this path, they will unwittingly stir up chauvinistic feelings and racial prejudice and hence undermine cross-cultural unity.

I am happy to have had the chance to mix with and make friends with people of various racial and religious backgrounds — in school, in the army, socially and at work. In every instance, race, religion and nationality have, happily, been irrelevant.

I am thus unhappy that the authorities are now taking measures and making pronouncements that make people conscious of their differing

racial and religious backgrounds, and, worse, their differences rather than their common characteristics.

For example:

■ The increasing tendency to talk about the qualities of, and differences between, the major ethnic groups in Singapore. This has led to racial stereotyping and the highlighting of seemingly negative aspects of each ethnic group's economic and educational performances rather than the positive aspects.

■ The classification of people into racial and religious groups, as if inter-racial marriages do not exist. In my view, inter-racial marriages are a reflection of inter-racial harmony. They hold the hope for a more united, happier and more peaceful world.

■ The equally annoying tendency to highlight differences between Eastern and Western civilisation, between Caucasians and Asians, etc, especially in a patronising manner that suggests that the East has a monopoly on virtue.

■ The suggestions made for instilling of "values" along language and racial lines. For example, the suggestion that Chinese primary school stu-

dents learn Chinese at first-language level.

I am concerned that this will segregate the children of various backgrounds and get them off to a bad start where social interaction is concerned.

In this connection, I also refer to the article about some local companies having their board meetings in Mandarin (ST, Oct 6).

Does this mean that such companies will never admit directors or senior officials of other ethnic backgrounds?

In Singapore, we have so far made ethnic issues irrelevant in our development, by having policies that unite rather than divide, by emphasising that we are all Singaporeans, by promoting cross-cultural unity and reminding the people that we are the same, not different. So why are we taking a different course now?

I urge the authorities and the media to de-emphasise ethnic differences, avoid racial stereotyping, and encourage inter-racial interaction and mixing.

**NARESH MAHTANI**  
Singapore 1955



BUSINESS TIMES  
18 JAN 1994

## Steps to racial harmony

BRIGADIER-GENERAL (NS) George Yeo has said that mutual learning is the most important condition for good inter-racial ties. But he stressed that it was also the hardest to inculcate. Learning from another race must, of course, start with learning the language

and culture of that race. It is natural for young Singaporeans to communicate in English. Hence, it will be an uphill task to encourage them to work seriously at achieving a good grasp of their mother tongue and understanding their own culture.

Inevitably, it will be even more difficult to make them feel the need to learn the language and culture of other races and to instil and prolong that interest. But, for the sake of long-term planning, steps must be taken now to move slowly but patiently towards that goal. The Chinese, as the biggest community, should play a leading and active role in this respect.

Lianhe Zaobao  
Jan 17

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